



## Billy's Home by JustHargroveThings

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**Summary:**

Billy Hargrove and Giselle Pena were never really close in high school. In actuality, Giselle's high school bullies all ran with Billy's crowd. They managed to cause emotional trauma that follows Giselle to this day. Life was normal, and she hadn't thought about Billy since their final altercation before graduation. Since then, he's been missing. But now he's home, and a little different than before.

People can change, right?

# 1. Chapter 1

It's moments like these that remind me how easy life is. The windows are rolled down and the crisp wind whips at my face as we take a smooth curve. Glancing over at the seat next to me, my sister vibrates with excitement. It gleams in her eyes, illuminated by each streetlight we pass under. Her small round face is adorned with green stripes on her cheeks, and she's wearing the latest trends. Her hair is pulled in a tight pony on the top of her head, secured with a white scrunchie.

"Are you excited for freshman night?" My voice carries over the radio.

Her wide smile and quick head bobs confirm.

I feel a twinge of nostalgia creep up my throat. It lodges right before my mouth, and I struggle to swallow it back down. Graduation was four years ago, and the adult world still sucks. . I'd cut off my left arm to be back in Lydia's stark white shoes.

"Are you going to stay to watch?"

I can feel her eyes peering up at me, yearning for me to say yes.

She knows how rough my high school experience was. It's not easy being the second generation to an immigrant family. Lydia was a little luckier. She inherited our father's tall lanky genes. Don't get me wrong, she's adorable, just not as full bodied as our mother and I. Maybe she's a late bloomer, but she's already towered over me. If you didn't know our parents, you would likely have no idea she was from anywhere but the United States. We both have dark eyes and pin straight black hair. Where Lydia is gifted in being lean and tall, I am unfortunately given rounder hips, and the height marker on the kitchen wall barely puts me at 5'2".

My physique was always a point of contention growing up. Childhood pictures paint me with pinchable cheeks, and a small rotund belly that would peek out underneath my shirt when I raised

my arms. Latin households show love through food, and to my parents, I was well loved. Sure, as I grew taller my body stretched and everything dispersed a little more evenly. But once my height abruptly stopped at the end of elementary school, my weight fluctuations began once more. Puberty assisted in distributing everything to give me a more feminine shape, but I was still so much more enhanced than the other girls growing up. I got my first training bra at eleven, and I remember my face burning as my female classmates would huddle together, whispering loudly about my changes.

I shake the frustrating thoughts from my mind, and glance back down at Lydia's expectant eyes. I never answered her question.

My voice catches in my throat and I clear it desperately before answering.

"Do you want me to Lyd?"

She's twisting her fingers in her hands and sighs. I know what she's contemplating.

While she's more adept to fit in physically, she sometimes struggles socially. As the baby of the family, she can sometimes have a hard time portraying her feelings appropriately.

"I just don't know if Stephanie is going to be there... And I don't want to be alone."

"So you want your lame older sister sitting with you instead?" I'm trying to be relatable. But also, I really would rather not walk out in front of hundreds of judgmental teenage eyes.

Lydia's mouth gapes, "You're not lame!"

A lie.

I'm the lamest twenty one year old in existence. I can always feel the judgment from the matriarchs in the family. ***Poor Giselle, how will she find a boyfriend if she stays home all the time.***

I hear about my cousins from my mother constantly. They like to go

out and party, they like casual flings, and they like to drink. Not saying that I don't, but there's only so much clubbing I can do in little Hawkins. The men here are sub par too. If they do ever show any interest in me, they tend to blow it by saying they've never been with a woman as "exotic" as I am.

"Please Giselle?" Lydia's pestering snaps me out of my thoughts once more.

I have to remind myself that I was once in her shoes. In all honesty, I don't think I had ever gone to a football game if it didn't involve extra credit for a class. Even then, I would normally just buy the ticket and present it in class the following Monday. I'm her big sister for a reason, and if I have to suck up my own insecurities to help her enjoy her youth, then so be it.

I meet her gaze and sigh. "Sure."

Her wide smile fills her face once more and she turns ahead, excitement in her eyes. I don't recall ever being that pumped for a social event, we really are pretty opposite.

The parking lot is packed, and we have to park in the farthest spots from the field.

"Are you *sure* your friends won't be here?"

It's my last ditch effort to bail, but Lydia snatches my hand and drags me away from the car just as I finish locking it. I can only grunt in annoyance and trot behind her. The asphalt of the parking lot crunches under our sneakers and the last bit of sunlight is peeking through the trees, giving its final farewell for the night.

The man running the ticket booth looks to be in his early forties, and likely has a son playing on the team tonight. As it turns out, older men are some of the worst when it comes to lingering eyes. He doesn't help the stereotype as his gaze settles on my chest long enough to make both Lydia and I uncomfortable. All I can do is cross my arms and clear my throat.

"We need two tickets." I nearly bark at him.

His cheeks turn pink under his peppered scruff as he tears the flimsy papers from the roll.

“That’ll be \$4.00” He mutters, avoiding eye contact.

Once thing I have gotten good at is my feminine glare. Men around here don’t take too well to a mouthy woman, but a woman who says nothing but everything with her eyes is powerful. It’s like igniting a fire behind your irises, and nothing makes me feel that way more than a skeezy old man staring at my bits.

I snatch the papers from his hand and turn swiftly, there’s no reason to give him any more to look at.

Lydia’s seen it happen so many times that it hardly phases her anymore. She doesn’t comment on it as we walk towards the bleachers.

There’s teenagers grouped up in large masses along the walkway, so we continuously have to squeeze our way through. I step on one girl’s white sneaker toe on accident and she yelps.

“Watch it you cow!” Her preppy strained voice carries over the crowd.

It’s nothing compared to the things I’ve heard growing up. A simple flip of the bird held above my head is all the response needed.

“What a bitch.” Lydia grunts in front of me.

“Do you know her?”

She nods her head. “Brittany, she lives on cherry street”.

I purse my lips and nod with her. Cherry street is known for its affluent residents. Their front lawns are the size of our entire property, which explains itself.

We approach the bleacher stairs when a high pitched squeal picks up a few feet from us. My head swivels to find the source, but the crowd of people towering over me makes it almost impossible.

“Oh my God- Maxine!”

That voice I can pinpoint to my sister. Looks like she found a friend, which is great for her, but I can't help but roll my eyes. I knew she'd find someone here, I could've saved two bucks.

A blazing red haired girl skips into view, her face is painted similarly to Lydia's. They squeal once more and it rings in my ears. Didn't these two just see each other like five hours ago? I know my bitterness is really rooting from a place of self consciousness as I stand there awkwardly in the middle of the sidewalk, waiting for them to finish greeting each other.

“I didn't think you were coming tonight!”

“I didn't either, but my mom had Billy drive me!”

I watch Lydia's face scrunch in confusion. “I thought he lived in California?”

“He did, but had to come back home for a little while, something about losing his job.” Maxine shrugs.

I take a mental note to not disclose any personal information like that to Lydia, because obviously they're cool with sharing it like it's nothing.

I grimace in an automatic response, and Lydia's side eye catches me. I watch her face melt in embarrassment.

“Well Giselle, I guess...”

Ah, she's kicking me out of their little group. I would like to say it doesn't sting, but at the end of the day, I'm not fourteen.

I nod and glance up at the scoreboard. It's already half time, as we admittedly got there kind of late, but I didn't think it was this far into the game. There's not enough time for me to go back home and wait to pick her up.

“Uhm, yeah, I guess I'll just go hang out and read somewhere.”

Lydia smiles at me. Saying sorry with her eyes, and trots up the bleacher stairs with Maxine.

I purse my lips and blow a lazy raspberry as I turn around, scanning everywhere to see if there's a place to go hide and read my novela. Normally I'd sit in my car, but gas isn't cheap these days, and I should fill up soon. I spot a corner of fence that's illuminated by the overhead lights. It's perfect. Pulling my bag up higher on my shoulder, I walk confidently over to it. I keep my head high and my breathing slow, but I still feel eyes on me. Thankfully everyone I went to school with has graduated, so there's little chance of running into any of them, but I still hate to wonder what these little judgmental shits are thinking.

My new homebase is just within reach. I pick up the speed, excited to be engulfed in my story.

What comes into view next stops me dead in my tracks, I feel my mouth drop open.

I haven't seen his face since before we graduated. I don't think he even walked across the stage, and from what I knew, he fell off of the face of the earth.

Apparently not, because there he is, walking to my spot, cigarette in one hand, the other jammed into his tight pocket. He hasn't changed much, at least from what I remember. His hair is shorter though, his curls aren't at his shoulders anymore. Now they hang in a messy tumble on top of his head, with close shaved sides. His clothing is the same. Tight jeans that leave little to the imagination and a t-shirt that clings to his skin under an unbuttoned jacket. He still looks like an utter douche.

Normally, this wouldn't be such a big deal. But Billy holds a special place in my memories, and they aren't good ones. His crowd that he used to run with were some of the most relentless when they would tease me. They were the reason why I consumed nothing but salad lettuce and water for a month, with little results. That was when my mother had to sit with me and explain that I'll never look like the other girls here, and that it was okay. But to them, and to most others at school, it apparently wasn't.



He hasn't noticed me standing here, I'm still partially disguised by the crowd, and I'm frozen in place. The overhead light feels like a beam pummeling down on my frame. There's so many things I'd love to do, starting with a swift punch to his strong nose.

His eyes flit up in my direction while he lights up a second cigarette. His hand cupped around the flame, it casts shadows on his face, making it look more angular and sharp. I've been staring for a few seconds too long now, and his eyebrow quirks up at me. He must not recognise who I am from this distance, in this lighting. I watch his chest rise while he takes a long pull on the stick in his mouth. His head lifts as he lets out the cloud of smoke slowly and glances back at me. My eyes hit the floor now and I will my legs to carry me away.

***He didn't recognise me. He didn't recognise me. He didn't recognise me.***

The mantra repeats itself over and over in my head while my feet pound against the pavement. I didn't even realize I was running. I took off through the entrance gates and weaved through the cars to the safety of my own. My blood pounds in my ears and my breathing is ragged. I fumble with the car keys to get them inside the lock. My hands are shaking and the key ring slips out of my grip three times before I can yank the door open.

I slump in my seat and let out a wavering breath. I haven't had an attack like this in God knows how long, and it's surprising that just seeing one of my bullies caused this reaction.

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I've calmed myself down enough to finally open my book. I have to resort to reading under the yellow glow of the car light. Soon enough, I'm transported into my fantasy world, where all I have to worry about is if my two love connections will forgive each other for their silly miscommunications.

I'm well into the story when the light above me clicks off. A frown pulls at my mouth and I reach up to press it back on. It clicks once, twice, three times, and no reaction. My stomach drops. I twist my key in the ignition, there's a light ticking noise, but no turnover.

“FUCK!”

It’s all I can think to scream right now in the dark. Did I really just burn out the battery while reading some cheesy romance? In the distance the crowd roars, almost like a confirmation. I groan and let my head fall onto the steering wheel, it honks back at me. I didn’t anticipate going over a rescue plan tonight, but life seems to be a real pain in the ass like that sometimes.

First, I need to find Lydia, I don’t want to be stuck here after the game with a bunch of teenage assholes lurking around two stranded girls. Then, I’ll find a payphone to call dad.

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I find Lydia sitting towards the center of the bleachers, and when I finally get her attention to come down, she’s sure to drag Max down with her.

“Giselle! Do you think Max could come spend the night tonight?”

The question catches me off guard. Of course any other time, (that doesn’t involve us being stranded temporarily) I’d say yes.

“You know Lyd, I think maybe now isn’t the best time,” my eyes flick back and forth between the girls’ faces, they both are twisting into their stereotypical annoyed teenage setting. “I mean, she hasn’t asked her parents.” I tack on the first excuse I can think of.

“I just have to ask Billy!”

It’s then that my slow ass brain finally puts two and two together. Her Billy, is the Billy from earlier by the fence. The Billy that I despise with every fiber of my being, and it’s likely he feels the same about me.

I won’t say I’m completely innocent in this hate/hate relationship. I did eventually stand up for myself, and say some really shitty things to him. It was about a week before graduation. He grabbed my arm in the hallway, and it was the first time he’s ever made physical contact with me. I’m not one to be manhandled, especially by that asshole. He started trying to explain something, but I took it as my

opportunity to finally speak. I may or may not have insulted his hair, his demeanor, his intelligence, and a few other things. I still remember his expression when I finally stopped to catch my breath. His lax mouth snapped shut quickly and his eyes burned holes into mine. That was when he turned away and I hadn't seen him since... Until now.

My face goes pale at the realization.

"You know Max, I'm having some car trouble, maybe another time, how about next weekend?"

"Billy knows a ton about cars! He's working at a shop by our house, I'll ask him to help look at it and if it gets fixed, then maybe I can come over!"

Oh to be so naive. I panic and my wide eyes turn to Lydia, she has no idea why I'm giving this look, but she knows what it means.

## ***HELP***

But before Lydia gets the chance to stop Max, she's already gone. Her flaming curls darting through the crowd, towards the fence.

"Giselle, are you okay?"

Lydia's voice wavers and she takes my arm.

I force the frog in my throat down with little success.

"Sure, I'm fine," I squeak.

It's obvious I'm not, and she knows it. Before she can even protest, that familiar gruff voice comes into earshot.

"Fine Max, but don't go around offering me up for favors to just anyb-."

His sudden pause tells me that he's caught sight of me. I fully expect him to snatch Max's hand up and turn in the other direction, but he doesn't.

I can feel the blood rushing to my face when we make eye contact. I don't know why I'm so petrified of this man, but I can't let him know that.

"Hi, I'm Giselle."

Lets just play this like we've never met. Like I have no idea who this handsome man in front of me is. I put my hand out to offer a handshake and flash my sweetest, albeit wary, smile.

His light blue eyes glance down at my outstretched hand and back to my face. A flicker of suspicion dances in them. His own arms are crossed tightly against his chest. His biceps flex under the pressure. I can't help but notice that a few new tattoos adorn them now. He cautiously releases an arm and grips my hand firmly.

"Billy," he grunts. His calloused hand feels rough against mine. "Where's this problem car? I can only do so much in the dark."

I nod, but stay in place.

"Actually, I really think it's just the battery. I was in there reading under the light and it shut off."

His eyes stay trained on my face while I talk and he nods.

"Yup, sounds about right. Okay then Max, let's go."

Max makes a sound of protest and he throws a warning glare at her face. She either doesn't interpret the wordless communication, or she doesn't care.

"We can't just leave them Billy!"

I wince, I really don't want this to be any more awkward than it is. As I open my mouth to protest, he sighs and throws his head to the side, his expression lazy.

"Do you need a ride home?"

The words sound just like they would when he would sit in homeroom, being told to apologize by the teacher after being

reprimanded. Half assed. I don't know why, but his entire demeanor makes my blood boil. I reach for Lydia's hand and grip it tightly.

"No, thankyou for the generous offer though."

My teeth grit as I spit the words out, they seep through the air like a thick venom. Billy's face drops at my response and his brow furrows tightly. He quickly recovers back to his neutral face and shrugs silently. There's the jackass Billy I remember, I guess he never did change.

"Say goodbye Lydia, I'm going to call dad."

I release her hand and storm to the nearest payphone, insert a quarter, and dial the number for the man who's never let me down.

## 2. Chapter 2

Julio Iglesias' angelic voice lilts throughout the house. His serenade seeps through the crack under my bedroom door. Mom is doing her normal early Saturday cleaning and playing her soft ballads. Julio croons about his lover, and how he hopelessly falls for her. Mom's tone deaf voice overpowers his beautiful one every so often, and I can picture her singing into the broom handle. I suppose I can see where my love for cheesy romance stems from.

The vacuum kicks on and drowns out the melody. I curl my hands behind the pillow under my head and squeeze it tightly against my ears. The howling continues to pierce through the down, and my legs flail in frustration. I flop over on my stomach, face down into the mattress and let out a screech. Every Saturday is a reminder that I need to get my own place.

A knuckle raps on my bedroom door.

"Giselle, get up mija, we have to get you a new battery."

My father's rough voice carries through the barrier. I only respond with a gruff and I can hear his raspy chuckle on the other side. "Your mami made breakfast. I suggest you get it before Lydia comes down." His warning is real, because while Lydia is rail thin, she can eat like a professional linebacker.

My stomach growls in protest, like it heard the offering for sustenance. I push myself up off of the mattress and catch a glimpse of myself in my dresser mirror. My hair is wildly fuzzy around my head, like a dark halo. My eyes droop sleepily and I let out a yawn, one that brings forth my many chins. Once my bare feet hit the hardwood floor I immediately shiver. The cold is starting to creep through more and more each day.

I plod out into the kitchen, and am greeted by the bright yellow and green walls against the stark white cabinets. I can't help but shake my head when I see how ridiculous it looks. Each room is painted a

different non traditional color. I'm talking blue, red, green, purple, etc. My mother wanted it to remind her of her home growing up, she wanted it to be happy. Americans tend to stick to neutral colors, and she finds that boring. I never invited people over to the house growing up, in fear of what they'd say about the walls. I couldn't give them more ammunition against me.

Dad is sitting at the kitchen table, looking down at a newspaper while dipping his ciabatta roll in the egg yolk on his plate. He sees me come in and smiles, it melts my heart. He's growing older, and it's so bitter sweet. His mustache is no longer black, it's peppered with more white and gray. His hairline is receding, but he keeps the hair on the top of his head long enough so that it can wispily cover his growing forehead. Photos of us growing up adorn the walls in the hallway, and it's almost too hard to believe that he was once a young twenty something year old man, with his whole life in front of him. Now he sits in front of me, edging fifty. He's always been my biggest fan, and shows me every day the kind of love I deserve.

He pats the seat next to him, as he's already dished out a portion of food for me.

"How'd you sleep?" He musters through a semi full mouth.

"Fine, heavy." I rip into my roll with my teeth, the crunchy crust crumbles in my hand.

"I can tell." A smirk forms at the corner of his mouth and his eyes crinkle as he looks at the mass of hair on my head. "So we have to get a battery, and pick up your car from the school. Hopefully that's all that's wrong with it... Otherwise." He trails off.

My car has been a point of contention for a while now, it's a hand me down car my parents had, a Toyota Corona from '73. Needless to say it's seen some better days, and it's likely going to crap out here soon.

"I'm hanging onto that thing until the very end." There are very few times that I'm stern with my father, and this topic is one of them. "It's just the battery, I can't imagine it being anything more."

"Let's hope not, for my sake." He shakes his head.

I can only smile at him. He knows I get my attitude from mom, and by this point, he's a professional when it comes to dealing with it.

"Good morning mami." Mom's airy voice says to the back of my head as she walks into the kitchen.

I swivel around and tilt my head at her. "Good morning mama." She's making her way to the table with the frying pan in hand and slides another egg onto dad's plate while she leans in for a kiss from him. I used to think it was so gross when they would do stuff like this in front of me, but now I understand. They don't care who their audience is, they'll show their love for each other to the world. Their marriage seems too perfect. Dad brings flowers for mom on the first of every month, and she makes him his favorite meal. They still snuggle on the couch every evening while watching the news, and they still kiss each other when they greet and depart. They've given me an almost impossible expectation for a romantic relationship. Ultimately I can blame them for not being married by the time I'm twenty five, if my dad even approves of anyone by then.

Admittedly I've never brought home any of my short term boyfriends, a whopping two suitors. I always wanted to make sure they were even good enough for him. The moment they gave the impression that they weren't, they were kicked to the curb. I've asked mom how she found a man like dad, and she says that God gives you a perfect man only once, and when he does you have to grab him before another woman does... Which might explain why they married at twenty.

"Go on and get ready Giselle, we need to leave soon." Dad waves me away and I snag the last piece of my bread and scamper off to my room.

I run a brush through my hair to tame it and notice the oil buildup. It's only been a day, but my dark hair leaves no room to skip washes. It'll have to be a bun day. I toss it up into a messy knot, pull on some loose jeans and an old lazy snoopy t-shirt. After scrubbing my teeth I trot out of my room and try to evade my mom's line of sight... Unsuccessfully.

"Giselle!" It's a bird like screech that makes me wince. "Turn



around!” Her voice is sharp and her accent is thick when she gets upset. I obey her and give my best anxious smile.

“You are NOT leaving the house like that.” Her eyebrows are pulled together and her mouth is in a terrible scowl.

“OOOHHH Giselle’s trying to leave looking bummy again!” Lydia’s mocking voice carries down the stairs. She hasn’t even left her room but she already knows what’s happening. This is a common occurrence.

I ignore the prod and whine, “Mama, we’re just going to work on the car!”

I try this every time, and I don’t know why I even do, because it’s always useless.

“You never know when you’ll meet your future husband. I met your papi while at the paleteria. Thank goodness I was dressed well, because if not, he may have thought I was sloppy.” I’ve heard this spiel hundreds of times.

Dad chimes in like he usually does. “I would have thought you were beautiful in a paper bag.” He plants a firm kiss on the side of her head.

Mom’s face softens slightly at his comment, but then tightens again at me. She says nothing more and points in the direction of my room. Arguing is futile, so I trudge back to my room.

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I fidget with my shirt while dad drives. It’s fitted and uncomfortable. I have to constantly think about how my stomach looks while I’m in it.

“I don’t know why she makes such a big deal about what I wear.”

Dad purses his lips and thrums his fingers against the steering wheel before answering.

“You know she only wants what’s best for you mija.”

I sigh and pull my jacket tighter against me to cover my chest. I know he's right, she's so traditional, and thinks that women should always look presentable when in public. But the likelihood of me finding my future husband in Hawkins is slim to none. I can't believe I'm even thinking about the prospect of it. It sounds so wrong.

As if he's reading my thoughts, dad pipes up again.

"You have to not be so critical of men. I'm not perfect, and it takes time to grow like your mama and I have. I used to be terrible, Giselle. I've made mistakes and we've learned from them together."

This is the first time I've heard him talk honestly like this about their marriage.

"That's not true dad, you and mom are perfect for each other."

"Giselle, you are a grown woman now, and it's time you understand that relationships are not always good. They go through bad times, but that's what makes them worthwhile, because you push through."

His voice is stern, leaving no room for argument. I nod silently and wonder what he means when he says he made mistakes.

He must feel my uncertainty and takes my hand, glancing between my face and the road.

"You're so much like your mother. You are beautiful mija. People make mistakes, and your mother was generous enough to forgive me for mine. I pray you will never go through what she did, but you must understand that people do things they regret. If they are remorseful, consider forgiving them, if you can."

He squeezes my hand tightly and lets go, as we pull up to the store front.

My mind goes to the worst. Did he cheat on mom? When did it happen? I don't remember any hardships in life growing up, they always seemed happy.

I don't have much time to contemplate everything because once we step inside we're immediately greeted by an overly enthusiastic

teenager at the counter. He's in greasy blue coveralls and we're obviously one of the first interactions he's had all day.

"Good morning!" He chimes before the door can even close behind us.

Dad nods and glances at me expectantly.

I look between him and the guy at the counter a few times and feel my heart start thudding harder. "oh, you want me to?" I point at myself to confirm with dad.

He nods again.

This is the first time he's made me talk about car related things to mechanics. I shuffle to the counter and lean on it casually, trying to keep my cool. The kid's name tag reads: *Hi, I'm John*

"Uh, hi John, need a battery for a 73 Corona."

"Maybe get some more oil too mija." Dad pipes up from behind me, he's such an awkward distance away. John can obviously hear him, but I reiterate it just in case.

"And some oil please."

He nods, "The battery I can do, let me just check with our other mechanic to confirm what kind of oil you'll need." His thumb juts over his shoulder at the window panes behind him. Through them are all of the cars currently under maintenance, but I don't see anybody working on anything. He turns and pushes through the door and I can see him bend over beside a car, his head is out of view.

While I wait I glance around the shop. Isles line the back wall opposite of the counter, their names say things like *Body Supplies & Nuts and Bolts*. I'd have no idea what I'd be looking for or where to find it in here. There's an unmistakable smell of rubber and new car air freshener. I turn back to look at dad and he gives me a thumbs up, proud to see me doing independent adult things. He's always helped me with car maintenance, he's always done the talking.

There's a loud clatter and an unintelligible shout. I swivel my head

back to the windows and gawk when Billy Hargrove stands up into my line of sight. My memory smacks me with Max's voice, "Billy knows a ton about cars! He's working at a shop by our house."

I watch as he points downwards while his face is twisted in a scowl, he's obviously irritated with John. Billy shakes his head as they trade places, and John disappears under the car. I watch Billy wipe the back of his neck with his oily hand as he makes his way to the door. When he opens it, I see a flicker of surprise cross his face at the sight of me, before it softens back into its normal expressionless setting.

He picks up a rag off of the counter and wrings it between his hands, leaving black smudges all over it.

"What can I do for you?" His customer service voice is lackluster.

I can't help but notice how a curl or two hang out through the little hole in his backwards cap. His coveralls are rolled up to his elbows, and his forearms are smeared and rippling.

Dad confuses my gawking for hesitation and calls out from behind me, "Oil, she needs oil."

Billy's mouth presses into a thin line and he nods.

"John couldn't figure out what oil you needed?" His words are fully annoyed and he rolls his eyes. "This is for that problem car of yours then, from last night?"

Wow, stellar memory there Sherlock.

"Yeah, we need a battery and we think it's about time for an oil change too."

Billy nods silently and grabs a large book from under the counter. He opens it and leans down to see the text better, placing his large hands on either side to brace himself.

"What's the model and year?" His eyes are trained on the index that he's flipped to.

"73 Corona."

His eyes flick back up to me suddenly.

“You’re joking.” It comes out as a scoff. His mouth curls up into his usual mocking smirk.

I cross my arms and put my weight onto one leg, jutting a hip out. Dad knows exactly what this stance is, as he’s seen his wife do it a million times. I can hear his footsteps carry away behind me, he’s probably retreating to a random isle.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My voice gets an octave higher and I squint my eyes.

Billy doesn’t falter and keeps his gaze even, making me feel uncertain. The pools of blue have never been so intense pinned under those thick lashes.

“It’s no wonder it’s giving you problems, how many miles are on the thing?”

It’s his turn to stand up straight and cross his arms now. The fabric of his uniform digs into his broad shoulders from the sudden strain.

I hesitate at the sudden sight.

“Like 93,000 or so.”

He doesn’t answer immediately. I watch his eyes scan mine, then down my face and back up again after lingering for a beat too long.

“You’d be lucky if that thing survived another six months.”

His smug attitude is taking me right back to highschool, and I can feel my face getting hot. The back of my neck prickles and I dig my fingernails into my palms. It’s so unfortunate that such good looks were wasted on a complete waste of a person.

“And I intend on driving it until it gives out. So if you don’t mind, just tell me what kind of fucking oil I need, thank you.”

His eyes get wide at my outburst and he drops his hands to the counter. I’d imagine he doesn’t know how to respond, and I feel a

twinge of guilt for being so rude.

He leans forward however, just inches away from my face. I freeze in sudden shock, and his eyes darken as they scan down my face for half a moment. Then he turns his head towards the rows of isles and points to the one at the very end of the store. At this distance I can smell the musk coming off of him. It's a mix of motor oil and pine deodorant. His shoulder bumps mine as his body is fully extended over the counter.

"That's the isle you need, full synthetic, motorcraft." It comes out as a husky mutter close to my ear.

I swivel my head back in his direction, but he's already stepped away from the counter. Moving towards the opposite side of the store.

"I'll get that battery for you." He calls over his shoulder.

### 3. Chapter 3

“**Ladies!**” My hoarse voice cries from the living room in desperation. “Please, the giggling is incessant!”

I promise I’m not usually this much of a stick in the mud, but for the past two days I’ve been fighting some sort of cold weather bug. It’s been kicking my ass. Mom and dad left for a few days to visit some friends in the next state over. Since I’m of legal age, I tend to be the live in sitter, which is fine, since I do live here rent free. I’ve noticed that since I’ve moved back home, they seem to take more couple trips. They must be enjoying that they can be a relatively free couple now that I’m here. But the magic of their romance seems less than usual, as dad’s words have been playing back over and over again in my head. *People make mistakes, your mother was generous enough to forgive me.* It hasn’t been brought up in over a week, and it seems like dad intends to keep it that way.

Another high pitched squeal carries down the stairs, and I can only rub my temples in protest. Thankfully, Max is being picked up today, and my head can finally get some rest.

“Lydia!” I try desperately to get her attention without leaving my comfy cocoon on the couch.

The door creaks open, “Yeah?”

“Have Max get her stuff together, it’s about time for her to go home.”

A resounding groan comes back in response.

“Can’t she stay for another night? We both have the same first period tomorrow!”

This conversation happens more often than one would think, and the answer is always the same.

“You know mom’s rules, no friends on school nights.” I roll my own eyes as I repeat the mantra.

When I don't get a response I turn back to the book splayed out on my lap and moan. The typewriter font makes my eyes strain and my eyebrows pull together. This is the longest time I've spent on a book, and I can't stand that I'm unable to continue due to my own discomfort.

I push myself up from the couch and plod into the kitchen, feeling my messy bun sagging down the back of my head.

I contemplate the leftover food on the stove and consider making Max an extra plate. One thing I do remember about Billy's lifestyle in highschool is that his home life was shit. Maybe it would be a good service to Max. I never knew if they were starved or abused, and if they were I'd never know from looking at Max. She's one of the most bubbly kids I've ever seen, it's crazy that two products from the same household could be such polar opposites.

Right on cue, the two girls come down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Hey Max, I was just making you some stuff to take home." My back is to her as I scoop the leftover arroz con pollo into a rubbermaid container.

"Oh, okay thanks, I'm sure mom would love it!"

My eyes cut sideways at her, I'm desperately trying to figure out this family dynamic.

"Should I pack more than one? We have plenty."

Her fiery head shakes side to side, the curls moving smoothly with her.

"No thanks, Billy really only eats chicken and vegetables all the time." Her nose crinkles at the thought. I'm assuming it's pretty bland... and steamed.

"That sounds gross." I can't help but squinch my face with her.

"It is, but he likes what he likes I guess." She shrugs.

I'm tempted to press further, ask about the father figure in the



household, but I keep my mouth shut. If Max was concerned about feeding him, she would make it known. Against her wishes though, I quickly grab a second container and fill it to the brim.

"This is good to freeze, keep it on hand for when you get a feeling for some authentic food." I hand both containers over.

She smiles lightly, and nods her head. "It is really good, thank you."

I instinctually start collecting the dirty dishes and begin scrubbing them in the sink. I can feel that the girls haven't moved from behind me, and realize they're waiting for my ok to release them.

"You can go hang out upstairs, I'll let you know when someone's here for you Max."

There isn't a verbal response, just the sound of their footsteps running back down the hallway and tromping up the stairs.

I catch my reflection in the dark kitchen window. I look like absolute garbage. My eyes have purple circles under them and my baby hairs are a flayed mess around my head. Thankfully mom isn't here telling me to be presentable. She'd probably have a heart attack if she saw me standing here in my tweety bird pajama pants and night tank top with company here, even if it is a fourteen year old girl.

A loud knock sounds on the front door. The sudden sound makes me jump and drop the pot I'm scrubbing into the sudsy water. It splashes back onto my face and shirt. A groan escapes my mouth as I dry myself off with a kitchen towel.

Another hurried knock sounds through the house.

"I'm coming!" My voice sounds like shit.

Of course, the girls are nowhere to be seen, they like to hide until the very last second when Max's mom comes to pick her up.

I fling the cloth over my shoulder and make my way to the door, the silhouette standing on the other side of the foggy glass makes me want to turn right around and grab Max from the room. I can already tell it's Billy, and I want nothing to do with him right now, looking

like this. He knocks again, even louder than the first two times, I have no choice but to answer before he knocks down the door.

I take a deep breath and pull it open. It takes him by surprise as he has his fist raised in preparation for his next knock. He jumps lightly and I can't tell if it's from the door opening or from my current bummy appearance.

"Giselle, I didn't know you were..." his head drops and his eyes stay glued to his feet.

I didn't realize I looked that awful, good God.

"It's fine, let me go get Max." I start, and move out of the way to let him in. It's starting to drizzle, and as irritating as Billy is, I won't let him stand in the rain.

He accepts my offer and moves to come inside, but takes a moment to wipe his large boots off on the doormat first. As I turn to head towards the stairs, he reaches out and grabs my wrist, giving me sudden flashbacks to the moment I verbally abused him to the point of no return. I gasp and snap my head in his direction, my face makes him wince but then he quickly shakes his head. I can't help but notice how warm his hand is against my skin, despite the cool temperatures outside. His fingers are strong and grip onto me firmly.

"Maxine, get down here, let's go." His booming voice calls up the staircase. It rattles off of the walls and I can feel his demand in my bones. I don't understand why he didn't just let me go up and get them...

Lydia's dark hair squeezes out of a cracked door. "She'll be just a minute! She forgot to pack something!"

The door closes just as quickly as it opened.

The silence that fills the room is deafening, and I rock back and forth from my heels to the balls of my feet, avoiding eye contact.

"So... I see your car's back in the driveway. You got it taken care of then?"

I sneak a look at him before quickly dropping my eyes again. His hands are shoved into his jean pockets, and he looks just as awkward as I feel. I never would have thought that he would ever be standing in my entryway, yet here we are.

“Uhm, yeah. It’s working fine now... no more reading in the dark.”

My eyes close tightly at my trivial comment. I’m awful with small talk, and I tend to say the most cringey things.

His hand raises up to scratch the back of his head, and his cheeks puff as he slowly breathes out. As it comes to an end, he speaks again.

“Yeah, I haven’t really been one for reading. I can’t understand how it keeps anyone’s attention for so long.” He wags his head in disbelief.

“You just have to find your genre... some things I can read for hours on end, others I can hardly get through a paragraph.”

I peek up again, and this time meet his eyes. They’re watching me intently. A part of me would love to stare at them forever, and it may be my fever ridden head, but I can’t look away. He blinks slowly and scratches at his jaw casually, it flexes as he lets out a yawn. He’s getting bored with the book talk, but for whatever reason I try to continue.

“I mean, you seem to be into cars right, maybe you’d like a book about them?”

A look of annoyed confusion eats up his face, and I can feel my heart drop. This is what I get for trying to make conversation with an absolute asshole. I cross my arms and turn my head away, shaking it in disbelief.

“Forget I fucking asked.” It comes out as a mutter, and he likely can’t hear anything but grouchy mumbles.

“I mean, I guess I could. But it’s not like I’d spend my time reading about them when I can physically just work on them.”

He makes a good point.

I nod my head and chew on my cheek. “Well, what kind of movies do you like? Sometimes that can correlate to what kind of books you’d be into. Most times it’s even better in book form because it can be so much more detailed, you know like the...”

My eyes pull back to his face and I realize I’m rambling too much. He’s gazing down the hallway, not paying an ounce of attention to what I’m saying. I let out a sigh and walk towards the kitchen.

“Seems like the girls are going to be a while, are you hungry?”

After a moment of silence I hear him take in a sharp breath, likely coming back to reality.

“Hm?”

“Food? Sustenance? Big man hungry?” I use my best cavewoman voice.

I just know that earned me a heavy eye roll. Yet, his footsteps still end up thudding lazily behind me.

“I’ve got plenty of leftovers, and we probably won’t eat it all.”

I’ve been known to make far too much food, especially when it comes to these one pot meals.

He takes a look at the rice and chicken blend in the serving bowl and crinkles his nose.

“Why’s it green?”

I pull my eyebrows together and cut my eyes at him. He notices immediately and for the first time he quickly backs down, his cheeks turning pink.

“I mean, I just haven’t seen that before. What is it?”

“The rice is boiled with a culantro blend, and it has some peas in it.” I shrug and dish out a small portion intended for myself, but lift it to

him as an offering.

His stomach audibly groans.

“You’ve ratted yourself out, take the bowl.” I shove it towards his chest and turn to make my own.

I can barely see him lift the bowl slowly to his face to sniff it, at least he does it while he thinks I’m not looking. A brow raises quizzically, but at least he hasn’t gagged over it.

“Sorry it’s not mushy steamed veggies, but I’m personally not a fan of those.” I tease before pushing a spoonful into my mouth.

He watches my expression intently and cautiously follows my movements. I waggle my eyebrows at him as he chews, a stupid smile pushes at my full cheeks. This is one of the tamest dishes one can make, which is why I’ve made it while Max was here.

He doesn’t give me the satisfaction I seek, but instead silently takes in a huge spoonful and shrugs. I’ll take what I can get at this point.

“I’ve already packed two to go containers for Max, do you want me to make you one?” It’s the real test to see if he’s actually into the food.

He swallows harshly and ponders my question.

“I mean, I guess we don’t have much for me to take to work tomorrow...”

The statement hangs in the air, and I understand what he isn’t verbally asking. I bend to grab another container and scoop in enough to fill it about halfway. I push it in his direction, gesturing to see if he wants more. He gives me a sheepish smile, and pinches the air, asking for a little more. I take it upon myself to just fill it to the brim and clamp down a lid that domes at the amount of food under it.

Suddenly, his arm brushes against my back, sending shivers up my spine. Instinctually, I scoot forward, pressing my front as close to the counter as possible, and hear the faucet turn on. Scooting out of the

way, I turn and watch for a moment as Billy runs the dish rag around the inside of his bowl. The tendons in his hands and wrists flex as he twists them around. Watching him do something so simply domestic makes my chest flutter without my permission.

“You don’t have to do that, I’ll just-”

“Don’t get your panties in a twist, I’m just cleaning my bowl.”

My mouth opens and closes like a fish gasping for water, and I finally clamp it shut, watching in disbelief.

He reaches for my empty bowl and adds it into the pool of suds. His eyes push in my direction, and a small smirk lifts up his cheek. There’s a sparkle of mischief that flashes over his irises as he opens his mouth to speak.

“Is that alright with you princess?”

The pet name causes goosebumps to cover my arms. It’s weirdly charged, and obviously meant as a taunt. But I don’t know whether to gag or swoon.

“I- Uhm...” My eyes dart back to the hallway corridor. “That’s fine.”

My voice has never sounded as hoarse as it does now. I take the break in conversation to quickly trot down the hallway, escaping the sudden tension.

“Lydia! Max! What’s taking you girls so long?” It sounds desperate, even to my own ears. I ascend the stairs, not waiting for another half assed answer. I suppose I’m also trying to make as much distance between myself and Billy as possible.

I rap my knuckles on Lydia’s door desperately, glancing back over the banister to make sure he hasn’t reappeared.

When it cracks open, I shove my knee into it and force my way through, tumbling in on my hands and knees. Both girls look at each other and back at me.

“Close the door.” I grit through clenched teeth as I pant and stare at

the carpet in front of me. The staircase is a constant reminder of how unfit I am.

The door clicks shut and Lydia crouches down next to me.

“Giselle, are you okay?” Her hand glides up and down my back carefully.

After a few deep breaths, I compose myself and lift up to sit back on my heels.

“Yeah... yeah, I’m fine. What’s taking you so long?”

My eyes bore into Lydia, and she glances over at Max.

“We were hoping that you could convince Billy to let me stay the night.” Max finally pipes up.

I look between the two of them and cross my arms. When my mouth opens to reject their request, Lydia interjects.

“I know what mom’s rule is, but she isn’t here. She doesn’t have to know! We have the same first class tomorrow, why would it be such a big deal?”

She makes a good point, and I really wouldn’t care if Max spent the night, but now I have to break the news to the grumpiest person on this planet.

The silence of contemplation drags on and they both stare at me with their best attempts at puppy dog eyes. In reality, I don’t feel like dealing with Lydia’s attitude if I say refuse.

“Fine, fine.” I raise my hands in defeat. “But Max, why do I have to do this? He’s your brother.”

She quickly shakes her head.

“He never listens to me... plus he likes you!”

Her words reverberate in my head. I feel my face drop into a scowl.

“Max, he doesn’t, he was terrible to me in school. If anything, I’ve always been his mental punching bag.”

She pinches up her face and cocks her head at me.

“That’s not true, he’s been talking about you a lot since the football game. He didn’t know you still lived here, and he was talking like you two were friends.”

“Either way!” Lydia pushes herself into the conversation. “Can you please just go ask?”

I glare at her before pushing myself to my feet.

“I guess I can, wait here.” It comes out warily as I reach for the door, while Max’s words cause a slurry of confused thoughts to cloud my head.



## 4. Chapter 4

The bedroom door creaks open and I peer out, Billy hasn't made his way up the stairs. I get a harsh shove against my back, making me stumble forward. The glare I throw over my shoulder could turn someone into stone, and all I hear is a quick, "Whoops, sorry."

Peeking over the banister, I see Billy standing in the living room, looking up at a wall of pictures that my mother prides herself in. There's photos old and new in different sizes. His back is to me, but I know he heard the loud thud my body made just now. He doesn't move though, he's still invested in scanning over each and every picture. I take this moment as an opportunity to take my hair out of it's ratty bun, and try to comb it down into a manageable state with my fingers.

It's only when I start making my way down the creaky staircase that he turns around. His expression goes from nonchalant to annoyed at the sight of me, and it makes my stomach drop.

"Is she seriously still not ready?"

His tone contrasts with what it just was moments ago in the kitchen. It's sharp and irritated now.

My hands come together in front of me and I start pulling at my fingers nervously. I don't want to be on the receiving end of his aggression, not again. My mind is transported back to being fifteen and afraid of him. Worried of what malicious things he and his clique will conjure up to bring me down. I muster a deep breath and squeeze out as much fear as I can when I exhale and meet his eyes. It's a simple request. He has no power over me, we are not still kids, and he cannot disrespect me anymore.

"She wants to stay the night tonight."

I watch his demeanor flip like a switch. The air around him is charged, but his face doesn't falter. I hate that I can't read him and

anticipate his response.

“She couldn’t bring her ass down and ask me herself?” It booms from his chest, and my immediate reaction is to wince, squeezing my eyes shut. “She had me drive all the way out here for nothing?” He’s yelling as if this is my fault, and I realize then that he shouldn’t be speaking to me this way, in my own home. My eyes fly open with a rage and I’m prepared to take him down a peg. But I see that his head is angled upward. He’s yelling in the direction of the bedroom. “She couldn’t even call?”

When he finishes he glances at me, winks, then looks back at the banister of the stairs. His tongue is stuck on the inside of his cheek, and a slight smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. I’ve never seen a side of him like this, and I don’t know how to respond.

There’s not a response from the girls, so he barks again.

“Maxine!”

It takes less than a second for the door to swing open, revealing the little ball of fire. She walks to the banister and places a sassy hand on her hip. Her demeanor is challenging and I suck in a quick breath. Billy is so well known for his quick temper, and I can only imagine what a little bit of teenage sass can do to him. He crosses his arms at her and glowers like a disappointed parent. They stay this way for at least fifteen seconds, and it’s Billy who breaks the silence.

“Well?”

I feel my own eyebrows raise as I lift my head back up to Max, who has yet to move. I’d really like for them to figure this mess out so I can go back to laying around in my own sick misery by myself.

Finally, Max drops her hand and grips the handrail.

“Pleaseeee Billy? Oh pretty pretty please may I stay another night?”

She’s thrown her head back and has clamped her hands together in prayer to him. I can’t help but grin at her little show, but quickly cover my mouth with the collar of my shirt after I notice the glare I’ve just received from Billy. Air pushes out of my nose harshly,

desperately trying to stifle my giggles.

“You’re really not making me confident in leaving her here under your care you know?”

His gaze hasn’t left me while I try to compose myself. I wave a dismissive hand in his direction, still hiding my face.

“You deal with that, she’s never given me that attitude.”

He lets out an audible sigh and drops his arms to his sides. He’s finally realized that he’s not going to get far in this house of estrogen.

“Fine, don’t be a dick to Giselle, and you’re coming home tomorrow.” He pronounces his seriousness with a strong point of his finger in her direction.

Max stands straight and mocks a salute before swiftly running back into Lydia’s room. Another deafening squeal comes from behind the closed door after she’s shared the good news.

Billy winces and sticks a pinky in his ear, twisting it aggressively.

“Good God, you must be a saint for putting up with that shit.”

I shrug.

“I only have to remind them to keep it down every fifteen minutes or so.”

He wags his head slowly and glances behind him, checking for an open seat. I expect him to ask if he can take it, to which I would have tried to casually get him to leave. He doesn’t though, and just plops into the chair. His ankle comes up and rests on his opposite knee while he digs his fingers into the armrests with a satisfied sigh.

I can only gape at him. It looks like he’s made himself comfy enough to stay for hours. When he looks up at me again, he holds his hand out to the empty sofa that’s catty corner to his chair. He’s offering me a seat in my own home.

“Please.” He mocks with a stupid little smile that brings up his

cheeks. "Have a seat, make yourself comfy." The sparkle in his eye is hard to miss, and my stomach flips again.

I cautiously lower myself into my seat, wondering what his motives are. It has to be well past eight in the evening, and he should really be on his way, especially if his younger sister isn't needing him to take her home.

"So," he starts talking as if they were casual friends chatting on a Saturday afternoon. "What's got you stuck in Hawkins?"

His question takes me by surprise, not only is it an odd thing to ask outright, but it's incredibly personal.

He doesn't falter from his nonchalant demeanor, and simply rubs his chin, intently watching and waiting for my response.

"I uhm... I don't know. I suppose I'm here because my family is."

This answer makes him scoff.

"That's hardly a reason Giselle."

My ears start to burn while a mix of anger and embarrassment swirl in my belly. He has no idea what my situation is, and he's awful bold to come into my house and judge my life decisions.

"Well the last time I checked William," Using his full name dissolves his smug attitude. He sits up straight and eyes me suspiciously. "We are both currently stuck in Hawkins at the moment. What's your reason?"

He nods knowingly and pinches his chin between his fingers, contemplating his answer. After a moment of consideration, he cocks his head in my direction.

"I ran after something in California that didn't want me. Eventually ran out of money, and came back to the only place that had someone available to help me."

His eyebrows move upward as if to say, Is that what you wanted to hear?

I try desperately to steer out of the awkward cloud that's been created.

"Well, that's nice of your dad to let you move back in."

He shakes his head quickly, and retorts just as fast.

"Nope, dad's dead, came back to my step mom... Well, considering the dead dad, would she still be my step mom? Or is she some sort of ex-step-mom-but-not-by-choice step mom?"

He shrugs it off way too coolly, and now there's a dead dad elephant hanging around in the room unaddressed.

"Oh." I pause, clamoring for the only appropriate response in this situation. "I'm so sorry Billy."

There's a period of silence that lasts way too long. I shift in my seat, longing for when he decides to just get up and leave.

"Don't be, he was an ass. He drank himself to death last year, and... can I be honest with you Giselle?"

He leans forward and plants both feet on the ground in front of him, bringing both of his elbows to his knees. The look he gives me sends shivers through my body. His eyes are so intense that I want to look away, but I can't bring myself to.

"I couldn't be happier about it."

My eyebrows pull together in confusion, and he notices it immediately. He lifts a hand towards the wall of family photos, the way he looks at them longingly makes my chest tighten.

"You look like you've had a pretty decent home life... Don't get me wrong, pictures can be deceiving, but also watching you at the shop with your dad last week... That's a relationship that anyone would kill for."

My face doesn't soften, I still don't understand how someone could hate their father that much, we all have flaws. He ignores my look of suspicion and continues. Now though, he lowers his voice and leans

closer.

“My father was a monster, Giselle. I don’t just say that as a young guy who butts heads with his dad. It was so much more than that, and I thank whatever God is out there that he’s rotting in the ground right now.”

My eyes are as round as saucers. He’s right, my home life wasn’t so bad. How could I even begin to imagine what horrors would make someone feel that way about their own dad. There seems to be no appropriate way to respond.

The gap in conversation is unbearable, especially being left on that note. I want to steer away from the weight in the room, so I take the wheel and make a sharp left.

“So what’s your plan now then?”

He sits back into his seat and thumbs at his bottom lip, deep in thought. His eyes are gazing at the picture on the wall again.

“You know... I wish I knew that answer.”

I nodded and brought my attention down to my fingers in my lap. I couldn’t relate more. There once was a future for me. I had prospects to be an artist, to go to school in New York and make it big, but that was before mom ended up getting sick. I ended up staying home out of guilt, how could I continue and move away while my parents had medical bills to pay? Now that she’s cancer free, I often question what my purpose is. My scholarship has expired, and there’s no way I could pay for any of it out of pocket.

“What’s yours?” His husky voice takes me out of my thoughts.

I bring my face back up to his and he’s inspecting my expression intently. For whatever reason, I don’t remember him being this intense back in school, at least not in this way. He used to be so hard and bitter back then. Now he seems to be more lighthearted and open to conversation.

Even though there’s been a lapse in conversation and we’ve been sitting together for about a minute without an answer, it doesn’t feel

so awkward. We're just here, looking at each other, with no other sound than the occasional burst of laughter coming from upstairs.

I shake my head and let out a defeated sigh.

"I don't know."

My voice wavers without my permission and I can feel my eyes blurring up. I look away towards the pictures and try desperately to blink the tears away. These feelings aren't brought up often. My parents don't usually push me to find my way, they say it's okay to be unsure at my age. But ultimately, I feel like I'm still behind.

A warm hand cups over mine and I get the urge to jerk it away. Billy must feel me twitch and wraps his fingers around my palm to hold me there.

"Giselle it's okay, we don't have to figure it all out right now."

His voice takes a tone that I haven't heard before. It's smooth and warm like honey. There's a calming effect that his presence has that's surprising, considering our tumultuous past.

But even the brief thought of our past brings up the terrible memories again, and a lump in my throat bobs. The moment flashes vividly behind my lids every time I blink. I was walking into school in an outfit that made me feel confident, it was outside of my comfort zone, but nothing ridiculous. I'd decided to not wear my bulky knit sweater that day, and instead opted for a shirt that hugged my frame. I was really growing into my hips then, and also being reminded by every other girl that they were abnormal somehow.

Billy and his group were sitting at a picnic table near the entrance, eyeballing everyone walking by. Of course, Billy was only really into any girl who walked by. Every few weeks a new one would run up to him squealing and plop down onto his jeans-clad thigh. He'd look at each one like a lion looks at his next kill, with a hunger intensifying behind his eyes.

I remember a sick feeling swimming in my stomach as I approached. I tried so desperately to avoid eye contact, but that only does so

much. The girl on Billy's knee that week deliberately whispered in his ear while they both looked at me intently. His friend Tommy wasn't so kind, and blurted out the words she'll never forget.

"Woah there, who let Shamu out? Someone call SeaWorld!"

The chortle of laughter that erupted from the table was deafening. All I could do was wrap my arms around my midsection and quickly walk away, refusing to let them see me cry.

That was the first time I had been publicly embarrassed, but it certainly wasn't the last. Tommy was the main instigator, but Billy was always there. I shouldn't have expected Billy to stand up to his friends over a random girl, but it certainly means that I don't need to be friendly with him now.

I wiggle my hand out of his grasp quickly and pin it to my chest, gasping as I pull myself out of my terrors.

Confusion and what looks like embarrassment paints Billy's face at my sudden turn in demeanor. He opens his mouth to protest but closes it when he decides against it and only shakes his head.

"I don't understand you Giselle."

His words only spike my frustration again. How does he not understand what's going on? There's no way he simply forgot what they used to do to me. The emotional abuse that I endured was on a weekly basis.

I feel it burning my cheeks and my forehead crinkles tightly.

"It must be nice to be able to just forget about those things Billy. I'm not willing to be your next endeavor, just because we're from the same town doesn't mean I'll fall for your stupid tactics."

The words come out laced with a bitter harshness that I don't exude often. There are very few people that I feel this way about, and for him to act like nothing happened makes it worse.

He leans back suddenly while his face also contorts. I can't tell if it's anger or uncertainty, or maybe a mix of both.



“I don’t know what you’re talking about Giselle.”

His jaw is clenched tight and his words seep through his teeth. A part of me wants to take what I’ve said back. To just feel his hand on mine and pretend like I’m blissfully unaware of my previous traumas. But if he’d like to pretend like he doesn’t remember, I’m happy to remind him.

“Billy, you and your group were the reason I hated my appearance for so long. Hell, maybe I still do, but I put up a good front. You were my constant abusers and for you to act as if it never happened and pretend to be interested in me now is disgusting.”

My voice is raised and I notice that the girls upstairs have gone quiet. They’re nosily listening in to what’s going on.

Billy’s face drops to being expressionless again. The same way it was when I first saw him at the football field a few weeks ago. His nostrils flare slightly and his eyes have somehow darkened from their bright blue just moments earlier. I’m assuming that I’ve jogged his memory. I can feel my eyes burning with tears again, and the sight makes him drop his gaze to his feet.

A quiet, “Ah” escapes his lips.

“That day makes more sense now.”

It comes out as a murmur, but I can still understand it. He’s here in front of me, and I’ve just spilled my emotional guts out, I’m expecting him to offer something more.

“What day?”

It blurts out aggressively and makes him jerk slightly.

“Before graduation, when you said all those things. How I was the biggest idiot to walk this planet. My hair, it apparently looked like a botched perm... You know, that day.”

Normally I’m remorseful for what I say when I’m angry, but even with him sitting in front of me, I still don’t feel sorry for saying those things. It was my only moment to stand up for myself, and I took it.

“You know I left that day and chopped it all off?”

He sniffs lightly and glances up at me, his muscles pulling at his mouth.

I give him no response and only continue to glare. His face drops again and he looks back down.

There’s another beat of silence, tallying up the total to a countless number. I’m seconds away from asking him to leave. Really, I’m ready to forget about him and strictly avoid him at all costs.

“For what it’s worth now Giselle... I’m sorry. I know I never said anything to you, but I never stopped it from happening. I’m at just as much fault, and you had every right to say what you did to me.”

There it is.

The apology I’ve dreamed for. The one that I’ve laid in bed imagining over and over in my head. Sometimes it was of Billy crawling to me, groveling for forgiveness. Other times, I would have been satisfied with a staticy phone call with a simple, “I’m sorry” carrying over the line. This scenario though, was not one of the hundreds that I had conjured up, yet here it is.

He runs a hand through his tousled curls and sighs again, not waiting for my response.

“I guess I should get going, I’ll see you around.”

He braces his hands on the arm rests to stand, but I reach out and grab the one closest to me.

“Wait!”

I blurt it out without thinking, and he looks down at me, his face softening.

“Don’t go yet.”

## 5. Chapter 5

As much as I would like to say that what Billy did next didn't phase me, it did. It absolutely did, and my pride is now in tiny bits in my lap.

Even though I had asked for him to stay, I had reached out to him, trying to rekindle whatever we were feeling before my outburst, he wasn't having it. His face appeared like he would agree at first, but he hesitated, and looked out the dark window towards his car.

"Actually, I really better go."

My stomach plummeted through the floor, and my face had to have reflected it. It didn't matter, and he didn't address it. He still slipped his hand out from under mine and walked out the front door silently, leaving me alone in the dim room.

Now I'm here, still alone. The clock says it's just past midnight, and I've sat here replaying the moment over and over. I don't know how I could let myself be so emotionally vulnerable with HIM. Sure he apologized, but I must be awful stupid to really think that he would be interested in me. I look nothing like his typical chase, and quite honestly, maybe it's for the better.

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This morning I woke up feeling particularly bitter with my appearance. I stood in front of the mirror while I waited for my shower water to heat up, and pinched the roll of fat that's spilling out from my belly. I examined the stretch marks spanning my hips and breasts, sighing in frustration at the sight, before slipping into the boiling spray.

I then eventually creep out of my bedroom with my baggiest t-shirt and pants on, trying to hide what I've determined as unappealing today. The smell of eggs and fresh bread fill the hallway and I take a deep breath. My immediate desire is to beeline for the kitchen, to eat

my frustrations with my physique away. The other angry, bitter part of my rationale tells me that I don't need it. That black coffee and water will suffice.

The constant battle that I feel with every food based decision is exhausting. Sometimes, it's easier to just give in and eat, to stuff the feelings down with delicious comfort. I constantly have to make a conscious effort to make the healthiest decision for my mental and physical health, but I don't always listen to the rationelle.

"Giselle, breakfast is ready!"

Mom's voice tilts through the hallway, and I muster up the strength to walk in and pretend like everything's okay. Like I didn't just envision snipping off my belly fat with a pair of kitchen shears in the bathroom minutes ago.

Mom always gets overly concerned and maternal when she notices that my eating habits are off. Whether it's bingeing or fasting, she can tell the signs right away.

Even though my mind is battling itself, my stomach growls, and I still internally curse it. How dare it protest with so much stored fat?

I obviously know how this all works, and that I really should still feed my body properly, but there's a sort of animalistic thought process that takes over when I'm in this headspace.

Nonetheless, I take my place at the table, and dad looks up at me like he always does. His soft smile falters at the sight of me though.

"Mija, what's wrong?"

He can always tell when something is wrong, but he doesn't understand the extent of my inner turmoil like mom does. I would hate to worry him with anything more.

"Oh nothing, just didn't sleep well I guess."

He nods and sips his mug of coffee.

"You need to go to sleep at a normal time, your body can't keep up."

It's the best fatherly advice he can offer with the knowledge of the situation he has, so I appreciate the sentiment.

Mom's hand caresses my back and she peers over my shoulder at my face. She sucks on her teeth and presses her free hand against my cheek. It's warm and comforting, I can't help but lean into it, breathing in the smell of her perfume.

She retreats to the stove and comes back with a premade plate. She knows how to treat these situations, and often will give me just enough to satiate my hunger, but not enough to trigger a binge. I think she may feel partially responsible for all of my turmoil. Food was her comfort, and she only passed it on to me.

"Thank you mami." I mumble as she plants a firm kiss on my temple, before she scurries away to summon Lydia downstairs.

I spend the remainder of breakfast pushing around the egg on my plate, listening to Lydia's stories from her most recent school week. I eventually get it all down, and thankfully I don't feel particularly guilty about the meal. However, I still pre plan on avoiding any unhealthy options for the rest of the day.

-----  
I've taken my place on the couch, curled up in a ball watching terrible sitcoms as an escape from my inner thoughts. It's useless though, because every fifteen minutes Lydia pipes up, dragging me out of my blissful state of dissociation.

She has spent the last half hour begging me to drive her to the pumpkin patch so that she and Max can pick out the best carving pumpkins for the weekend. Thankfully, they'll be spending their time at her house, rather than ours. I don't think my eardrums can take another full weekend of them. Mom and dad had plans for the rest of the day, and I know I'd be the asshole if i didn't agree to doing something to help.

So I eventually give in, and she springs up immediately, insisting we leave right that second. I only have a few moments to prepare myself while she runs to the phone to dial the Hargrove household.

-----

The entire time I drive, my hands wring against the steering wheel. I say a silent prayer to God that Max's mother is the one that ends up escorting her to the pumpkin patch.

Of course, mom didn't let me leave the house in my safe clothes, so I've decided to hide my body underneath one of dad's sherpa lined jean jackets. Lydia looks polaroid ready, and has insisted that I take pictures of the girls together.

"Thanks for driving me... I'm sure you're counting down the days until I'm able to get my license."

"That's quite the understatement."

Lydia knows something is bothering me, but she, like dad, isn't fully aware of my personal turmoil as far as I'm aware. She also knows prodding me for information is a risky game, and typically opts to stay oblivious.

"Can I ask you something? Please don't take offense to it." I side eye her while I ask.

She stiffens in her seat, awaiting my question.

"Do you not have any other friends?"

She scoffs at me and swats at my arm. "Of course I do!"

"Okay... well why do you literally only spend time with Max?"

My issue isn't with Max. I am fully aware that my issue lies within the unexpected meetings with Billy. I'm no longer interested in seeing him more than necessary, especially after how our last interaction ended.

"I don't know Giselle, you've never really cared about my friends before now."

Thankfully her oblivion has allowed me to mask the true reason for my prodding. But she's right, I've never wondered why she's spent a

certain amount of time with specific friends.

As we pull up to the overcrowded patch, I manage to spot the blue Camaro in a spot far away from everyone else. I let out a guttural sigh and Lydia looks at me like I've lost my mind. It's then that she follows my line of sight and finally puts the pieces together.

"What's your deal with Billy? Sometimes you look like you hate each other, but then sometimes..."

My eye cuts to her again, daring her to say something snarky. She catches it and retreats.

"He used to be really mean to her you know... to Max?"

She looks down at her hands in her lap.

"I'd believe it." I gruff while gazing out the windshield at the clamoring bodies.

"But, she says he's different now. That ever since he's come back from California, he's not as angry anymore."

"I don't know, maybe he just needed to get away." I answer.

She shrugs and sits up higher in her seat. Her neck cranes to see if she can spot Max amongst the crowd. When she does, she quickly jumps out of the car and pauses before racing away, glancing back into the car.

"Can I come get you when we're ready for pictures?"

I don't meet her face and keep looking straight ahead, giving her a bleak nod. It's enough for her as she swings the door shut and trots up to the entrance.

I reach my arm behind my seat and snatch my book out of the back pocket and flip it open. It hasn't been touched in a few days with how busy I've been, and the thought of sliding down in my seat and escaping is delightful.

It only takes a paragraph to become enveloped in the story again. I'm

embarrassed to admit it outloud to anybody, but hate to love tropes are my favorite. There's something about the electric charge that's created while two people are obsessed with despising each other that just transitions into romance seamlessly.

A light tapping on my window brings me out of my little world and I bring my eyes up, still coming out of my haze. I'm mostly surprised when I see Billy on the other side, his hands on his knees while he's bent over to peer at me. An eyebrow is raised while he waits for me to react. It takes me a little longer than normal to process the situation, and he rolls his eyes while simultaneously simulating someone rolling down a car window.

I do as he motions and silently look at him, not really sure why he's here now, considering how we last left off. He apparently doesn't notice immediately and gives me a sly smile while leaning an arm on the top of my door, hanging his head under it.

"Funny how we keep ending up at the same place at the same time." He offers.

I make a face that likely looks like I just smelled something unsavory.

"Well, I mean it's always in relation to our sisters, who hang out fairly often."

His brow creases at my straightforwardness and he cocks his head to the side.

"Are you good?"

This question takes me by surprise, since I really don't remember a time where he's ever cared about my wellbeing. Do I tell him that I'm not, that our last interaction left a sour taste in my mouth? Maybe I'll tell him that I'm going through another terrible episode with my body, likely triggered from facing my emotions with him. Or do I give the normal answer that he's looking for?

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

He shakes his head and glances over his shoulder at the patch, trying to make sure the girls are still within sight. When he spots them, he



brings his attention back to me.

“Sorry I left so suddenly earlier this week, I just didn’t want to keep Janet waiting on my call.”

I rack my brain for an identification on who Janet is. Scanning through who I remember from high school, the only one I can place is a girl who went south for university, and she definitely wasn’t someone in his group.

He catches my confusion and answers my wordless question.

“My girlfriend... From California.”

I do everything in my power to keep from audibly sucking in my breath in shock. Of course he has a girlfriend, why wouldn’t he? He’s remarkably stunning, and in California where he likely hardly ever dawned a shirt? That’s nearly impossible to look past. I keep myself from imagining what hides beneath his shirt, even though it does cling tight enough to him right now that I can involuntarily make out some crevices of muscle.

“Ah, nice. I wouldn’t have tabbed you as the long distance type.”

He lets out a harsh gust of air from his nose and looks down at his shoes. They scuff against the loose rock parking lot as he lazily kicks.

“I guess I didn’t either at first, but she insisted we at least try.”

It comes out somewhat unsure. Is he not interested in continuing a long distance relationship. I’m sure it’s hard enough for him to be solid with one woman, but add in thousands of miles of distance and it’s probably near impossible.

I involuntarily chew on the inside of my cheek and start to space out as we sit in silence. He’s likely doing the same.

Suddenly, he slaps a large hand against the roof of my car.

“So this is the famous rinky dink, hmh?”

“Yep, in all of it’s sixteen years of glory.” I nod slowly while my fingers trace lovingly along the peeling steering wheel.

“I’ve gotta say, that’s actually really impressive.” He gleams down at me, and I try with every bit of being to avoid his gaze. Before it felt flirty, now that I know he’s currently in a relationship, it feels dirty.

I try to swallow the dry pocket in my throat and finally look up at him and smile slightly in agreement. Attempting to appear as platonic as possible.

His eyes do not convey the same message. Maybe I’m terrible at reading wordless interactions, but I swear his eyes are scanning over me intently. He’s taking in every bit of me he can, even while I’m huddled within a jacket that’s four sizes too large.

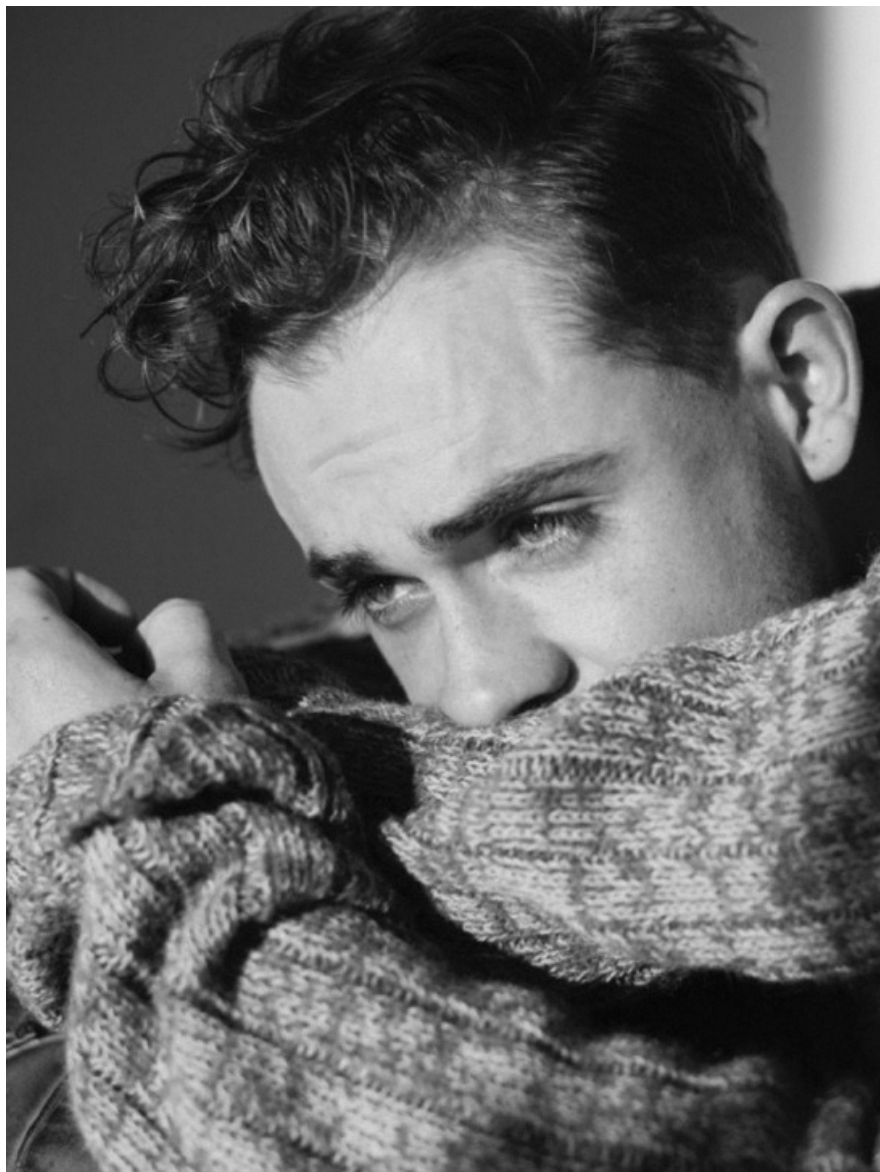
He brings his arm down to rest on the base of my open window, closing the comfortable space between us. His breath smells like the mint gum that he’s been rolling around between his teeth. There’s a significant smell of musky cologne that makes my stomach feel like dropping.

“What’re you doing later tonight?” His voice is low and husky, making my head spin. What would his girlfriend say about this?

## **6. Chapter 6**

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter is in the perspective of Billy, rather than Giselle.



Billy knows he's dancing on fragile grounds by asking Giselle about

her plans. There's just something about her that's simply enamouring, he can't resist.

A slice of chilly wind whips at Billy while he examines her face, searching for her reaction. There was a flash of surprise that came across at his initial question, but she was able to mask it quickly.

"Well?"

It comes out as a low rumble from his throat, and he swallows harshly afterwards. His eyes flicker across her features and he uses the moment to take her all in. Her plump lips are stuck in a soft O. He's stuck imagining his teeth nipping at her bottom lip. Her eyes are large and doelike, and her neck looks so... vulnerable. It's taking everything in him to not reach his arm through her window and grip the nape of her neck, and pull her into him.

He had plans to break it off with Janet. He really did, but he hated upsetting her. She was his only friend out in California. She supported him when his mother completely rejected him showing up at her doorstep. Things just got messy and they wound up in bed together after a drunken emotional night. She's not the type to have casual sex, she has to have labels. Janet was a sweetheart, and she smelled like salty air and jasmine. At one point his stomach got butterflies at the thought of her, but her constant phone calls and nagging has turned everything a bit sour. He's actually attempted to end it with her a handful of times, but she manages to change the conversation and drone on about her uneventful days. He can hardly get a word in edgewise.

"I... I don't know, I guess it was to just drop Lydia off at your house after this."

Giselle's voice is raspy and slow when she finally speaks.

Billy can tell there's something wrong, maybe the whole girlfriend bomb wasn't the smartest thing to drop. That's not the only thing messing with her though, she was off when he first came up. Sometimes he'd like to go digging in that pretty head of hers, to see what really makes her tick.

“Wanna pick up some dinner? Susan’s making chili tonight and it really isn’t my thing.”

His nose crinkles at the thought of the beef and bean mush in a bowl. Giselle’s face matches his and she finally cracks her first smile in this entire conversation. Billy’s stomach does a little flip at the sight of her parting lips. Her smiles always look genuine, they reach her dark eyes with ease.

“Fine, but you better let Janet know that you’re taking another girl out on a dinner date.”

Her boldness is as equally striking as her features. He feels his own smirk pushing at his cheek as he sideeyes her. His hand flaps dismissively towards her while he sucks on his teeth.

“She won’t mind.”

But she would. Lord if she ever caught wind of him even being in the same vicinity of another woman, she’d lose her mind. It’s yet another quirk about her that was incredibly irritating.

“Oooohhh Gisellllleeee!”

Lydia comes skipping around the corner with Max hot on her heels and Billy involuntarily rolls his eyes. He can only be so irritated with them though, they are the only reason he keeps getting to see Giselle at the moment.

Giselle’s head perks up and she lets out a sigh, waving Billy’s arm off of her door. He obeys silently and steps back to give her room. When she gets out of the car, he’s able to get a good look at her.

She cleans up well, considering her attire the last time they spoke. However, she can rock a pair of tweety bird pants like no other. His eyes graze her form while her back is to him, and he spends a few lingering moments admiring her ass.

The girls are clamoring around her chittering so quickly that he really can’t understand what they’re saying, not that he would really like to anyways. He’s enjoying his few moments of imagining how nice Giselle’s ass must be if he were only able to cop a quick feel. His

eyes trail upwards and he can't make out much more. She's got on the baggiest jean jacket he's ever seen and can't help but feel a little bugged that he can't see much more of her.

As if she's reading his thoughts, her head turns over her shoulder and she cuts her eyes at him. Thankfully, he wasn't staring directly at her backside when she caught him, but he certainly wasn't being subtle about looking at her in general. He can feel a heat spreading across his cheeks and thanks God that the lighting is providing low visibility with evening quickly approaching.

"Are you coming or not?"

*Oh Giselle, I'd like to, that's for sure.*

Billy clears his throat and croaks out a low "Yeah." Then plods along behind the three girls.

They make their way back to the entrance of the patch and stop in the line to enter. Billy can't help but notice all the sideways glances that Giselle is getting from surrounding guys. Guys with their hands intertwined with their supposed significant others. He has no reason to feel the twinge of jealousy that pulsates in his temples, he does still technically have a girl across the country after all. She doesn't really belong to him.

One particular man Billy recognizes from high school, Jacob Dirk. He has a ring on his finger and he's guiding his wife along with his other hand while they walk in the opposite direction. Billy's eyes follow him, and Jacob keeps his gaze to himself as they immediately pass. But there's a prickling feeling on the back of his neck, causing him to glance over his shoulder. He wasn't too surprised to catch Jacob craning his head backwards at Giselle's frame, but he sure was pissed about it. A low growl escapes from his throat without him realizing.

"Keep your eyes to your woman perv." it comes out as a grumble. Giselle is too preoccupied with the girls to hear him.

Jacob's brow furrows and he stops dead in his tracks. Billy's heart jumps a little in his chest. He hasn't been in any sort of altercation in a few years, and hopes that he's still just as spry as he was back then.

“You’ve got something to say to me asshole?”

One runover of this guy and Billy is positive that if anything were to get physical, he’d have no issue. He’s all polo shirt and pressed khakis, giving Billy real Cherry Street vibes.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I guess you didn’t hear me. I said, keep your eyes to your fucking wife.”

Billy’s arms cross against his chest tightly, and he can hear Giselle behind him.

“Billy, what’d you say?”

Concern fills her words but he ignores her.

Jacob’s wife grips his poor excuse for a bicep and silently pleads with him to let it go. He’s full of testosterone and rage from being called out though, and Billy has a feeling he isn’t planning on letting up anytime soon.

“Billy come on, we’re next in line!”

Max is used to his bullshit by now, and just wants him to leave it alone. The thing is, he’s not one to walk away from an altercation. He won’t let anyone have the chance of saying that he ran away.

He waves a dismissive hand behind him towards the girls.

“Go on in, I’ll be just a second.”

He hears Giselle protest, but once she falls silent he knows that Max was able to drag her inside quietly. He glances behind him just to be sure they’re gone, then turns his attention back to the man a few feet away. He raises an eyebrow and glares, daring him to say more.

“What makes you think I was looking at that fatass?”

Billy’s face flushes for just a moment before he recovers. When he does, he’s ready to snap Jacob’s neck. His fists flex in his arms and he grinds his teeth together, contemplating whether or not he wants to be the one to swing first. It is technically a charge if he does after all.



“Look dude, if you’re into big bitches keep it to yourself. That’s not everyone’s cup of tea.”

Billy’s at him in a second, planting a square punch to his cheekbone. It knocks him to the ground, while his useless wife screeches like a damn banshee above him. Jacob gets one good hit at Billy’s jaw while he’s underneath Billy’s weight. It makes his teeth snap shut harshly, and it only manages to piss him off more. Billy rears back, landing punch after punch into Jacob’s mangled face, he only stops when a few other men yank him off.

Jacob’s wife collapses to her knees next to his still frame, jostling him desperately. Billy doesn’t know when he knocked him out, but he definitely wasn’t conscious.

“Tell your pussy ass husband to watch his fucking mouth next time.” He snarls as he rips his arms away from the hands holding them back. There’s a moist feeling trickling down his chin, and he swipes at it with the back of his wrist. He’s suddenly aware of the stinging coming from his tongue and cheek. He must’ve clamped down on them pretty hard when he got hit. He spits out the excess blood seeping in his mouth and looks back up at the scene in front of him.

Jacob’s wife’s face is twisted with horror and he feels a twinge of guilt, she didn’t really deserve to watch her husband get knocked cold. Thankfully, Jacob starts to stir with a low groan. Billy still winces though, as he’s sure the cops are gonna get called now.

“Someone call him an ambulance!”

But Jacob quickly shakes his head, still slightly delirious.

“Don’t call the fucking cops, I’m fine. It’s not that bad.”

No, it was pretty bad. One of his eyes is already swelling shut, and his face is covered in blood from what Billy suspects is a broken nose. But leave it to this asswipe to let his pride come before his physical health. That isn’t really Billy’s problem though. He lets out a low sigh of relief and turns to head back towards the front gates, flexing his sore knuckles.

The girls come racing out just before he can reach the entrance. Giselle's head peers over his shoulder at the scene he's leaving behind.

"Did you do that?"

Billy doesn't answer but meets her eyes. He knows it's written all over his face, so he just sighs.

"It looks worse than it is." He knew that wasn't the truth, but if Jacob isn't worrying about it, then Giselle shouldn't either.

She's mortified at what he's done, and he can't blame her. They're not teenagers anymore. Grown adults don't settle their differences with physical altercations like this.

"What the FUCK Billy?"

She pushes past him and trots towards the group of people huddling around Jacob. When his wife catches sight of Giselle she gives a look that could kill. She can take a hint, and ends up walking straight past, towards the parking lot.

Lydia pipes up then,

"Uh, yeah I should go check on her." She darts away quickly, leaving only Billy and Max standing there.

"Well, I've gotta ask you why you did that."

Max has always been so casual about Billy's clashes. It's as normal as talking about the weather to her. Which he understands is a little sad, because you know, kids shouldn't be normalized to that kind of violence. She's seen it all though, specifically when it was taken on Billy daily.

"He said some shitty stuff, trying to be a hardass, and it got him punched."

"Looks like more than once"

Max nods slowly.

Billy shrugs and pulls a cigarette out of his jacket pocket and lights it. After inhaling deeply, he clasps a firm hand on Max's shoulder and yanks her into his side playfully.

"We might wanna go see what's up with those two."

They start to walk away, and Billy catches Jacob's grimacing face.

"Don't be too sad Jacob, you did get me good once. Maybe work on your stamina though."

He uses his hand holding his cigarette to point to the tender spot on his chin.

"Fuck you Hargrove."

Billy just lets out a barking laugh, it's not the first time he's heard that from a spiteful loser. He's sure it won't be the last time either.

As they round the corner to the parking lot, a very distraught looking Giselle is being comforted by her younger sister. The sight makes Billy's heart sink, he didn't intend for her to react this way.

When they approach the car, Lydia looks at them and frowns. She's indicating that this is in fact, not a good time.

Giselle's head is in her hands as she leans against the driver's side door. She glances up and scowls at Billy. Her eyes are rimmed red and puffy, and she sniffles harshly.

"Girls can you give us a moment to talk please?" Her voice snips out shakily.

Billy knows he's about to get an ass chewing of a lifetime, and looks down at the ground, aimlessly trailing his foot in the loose gravel. The girls do as she asks and retreat to Billy's parked car on the far side of the lot.

They sit in silence and Giselle does nothing but give Billy the harshest stare he's received in a long time. She must be waiting for him to say something. He doesn't really know how to explain what happened properly. As a result, his mouth opens and clamps shut a

handful of times before he can formulate what he wants to say.

“I did it for you.”

This was a poor start, as she was less than impressed. Her head shook quickly.

“I didn’t ask you to do that, it was not about me. It was about you trying to prove a point because you can’t just leave things alone.”

His chest tightens at her accuracy. Sure, it was mostly about the awful things that were said about her, but he also was incapable of just walking away. Nonetheless, this really isn’t the setting where he’d like to be overanalyzed about his issues with anger or whatever.

“Giselle, he was *looking* at you. No, gawking at you. Like you were some piece of meat with his wife standing right there on his arm.”

She lets out a distressed sigh and pinches her eyebrows together.

“Billy, if I punched people for looking at me a certain type of way I’d be in jail. It happens, people are gross. That’s still no reason to get violent”

“Well that’s not *why* I punched him.” He glances back down at the ground and snubs a rock.

“Then why did you?”

He can’t tell her why. There’s no way he could repeat what Jacob said about her. He knows that it’s a sensitive point for her, and even though it isn’t in the slightest bit true, it’ll cause her to completely clam up.

“Because Giselle, I had to.”

His answer infuriates her. He watches her pretty jaw tighten and her delicate hands twist into fists at her side. He can feel himself getting just as flustered with the situation. She doesn’t understand why, and he’s not in the position to help her understand. Comments like Jacob’s obviously fucked her up from when she was younger, and Billy wasn’t in the position to send her back to that headspace.

"I don't need anyone to save me Billy. I can take care of myself." Her words come out bitter and jagged.

Billy doesn't want this to be the reason why whatever is happening between them ends. He can feel his pulse in his open sores in his mouth, while static rings in his ears.

"I wasn't saving you!" It booms from his chest before he can properly react.

Giselle immediately shrinks, he can see that she's shutting down in front of him, and that's the last thing he wants to happen. There's nothing he can say to her to make it better, but he can't let her slip away.

In a moment of desperation, he reaches out and hooks a finger in her belt loop. She squeaks in surprise as he swiftly tugs her to his chest. His arms cling around her firmly while he presses his mouth and nose into the top of her head. She doesn't resist or attempt to push away.

Her hair smells like coconuts, and it's soft and silky against his face. He sighs deeply against her crown, then turns his head so that his cheek is on her.

"I'll admit I acted on impulse. But please don't believe I do this kind of thing all the time. I'm not like that anymore. He said terrible shit about you and-" He's spilling too much too quickly, and cuts himself short.

He feels her snuffle against his chest and his heart cracks a little more for her. She says something, and it's muffled in his shirt. He releases her from his grip and looks at her face.

"Hmh?" It grumbles out low and smooth.

Giselle wipes the tears away from her eyes with the heel of her hand. A small smile quirks at the edges of her lips.

"I said you smell nice." She lets out a little honk of a laugh.

Billy smiles down at her softly, pinching the tip of her chin lightly. Giselle sucks in a quick breath at his touch, but he doesn't move. He

wants to keep her right here in his grasp.

“Are we okay?” He mumbles while his eyes scan her face.

“Just don’t attempt to send anyone else to the hospital please.”

He doesn’t answer her, because he can’t really make that promise if someone else like Jacob comes along.

“Are we still okay for dinner tonight?”

Giselle hesitates, likely considering her current complexion, or maybe Billy’s current relationship status.

“I don’t know, I have to drop Lydia off at yours and it’s getting a little late.”

Billy shakes his head, he refuses to let her be scared off by him.

“We’ll just ride together. We can drop the girls off and head straight to eat. Go get settled with them, I need to do something for a moment.”

He tosses his keys her way and turns towards the payphone in a nearby pavilion.

Normally he wouldn’t be so forward with a woman. Admittedly, he usually doesn’t try so hard for them. Giselle is so much more than just physically beautiful though. She’s shown how witty, intelligent, and goofy she can be. There’s a depth to her that he’s intrigued by, it makes him want to learn more about her. It’s like she has a sort of magnetic pull to him.

He digs in his pocket for a loose quarter and slides it into the coin slot of the rusted machine in front of him. When he dials the number that he’s memorized, the line only trills in his ear twice.

“Well it’s about time you called.”

Billy rolls his eyes at the snarky tone on the other end.

“Listen Janet, we need to talk.”

## 7. Chapter 7

The dark blue Camaro is within my sights, and so are the girls that are huddled together next to it. Lydia's eyes catch me approaching. An urgent hushed whisper erupts from her and they push away from each other harshly. It's obvious that they were gossiping about me, or whatever they think they saw between Billy and I. A creeping irritation burns on the back of my neck and across my cheeks, they didn't see anything worth mentioning. He has a girlfriend after all, it was meaningless. At least, that's what I need to keep telling myself.

I jab the key fob into the lock of the front door and reach in to free the handles of the surrounding doors. The overwhelming smell of Billy wafts into my face, and I inhale deeply. It has an unworldly relaxing effect on me almost immediately as my shoulders loosen. Normally the scent of cigarettes is stale and harsh against my nose, but it smells like sweet tobacco here. His pine cologne sticks to the leather seats that the side of my face is pressed against as I desperately reach for the backdoor lock. I can't help but notice how clean the interior is. There's not a straw wrapper or receipt in sight. The floorboards reveal minimal dirt, and there isn't a single scuff to be seen.

Max yanks open the door the moment she hears it click free. The burst of outside air diffuses the Billy smell, and I can't help but feel a twinge of disappointment in my chest. The girls slide into the backseat, giggling quietly to themselves. Max turns her gaze to me, her eyes are as intense as Billy's. If I didn't know the family dynamic, I would have thought they were blood related.

"I've never seen Billy hug anyone before Giselle."

Her voice croons loudly and Lydia's barking laugh trails behind her. I'm still kneeling in the driver's seat, practically hugging the headrest now. My already burning cheeks feel like fire. There's nothing scandalous about a hug. I was upset, and he was comforting me. There wasn't anything more. You can't reason with giggling teenage girls though., so I simply sigh and pull myself out and get in on the passenger side.

My eyes stay trained in front of me, peering out the windshield, desperately searching for Billy to come. I don't know if that'll make the teasing stop, or overall worse, but at least I won't be alone in receiving it. The girls continue to taunt, they sing playground rhymes about kissing in trees and having babies.

*It was a hug, nothing more*

Every few minutes I need to remind myself when my mind trails off to how nice it felt being engulfed in his arms. Billy only wants a few things from women, and I'm not willing to do anything with him that doesn't result in anything long term. I'm not prude, but I have a few standards when it comes to people that continue to pop up in my life. Now had Billy been a guy at a bar that I noticed after a few drinks, I'd be all over him like a squirrel on a tree. This is now the fourth surprise encounter with him though, and they get progressively more intimate, meaning he'd be more than just a fling if it ever got that far. He'd stick to the inside of my head like glue. Even if it happened, I couldn't stand seeing him constantly when Lydia and Max decided to spend every waking moment with each other.

But most importantly. He. Has. A. Girlfriend.

Hundreds of miles away albeit, but a girlfriend. A commitment nonetheless. I refuse to be the person that destroys something that could have potential. What if Janice was his future wife? There was no way I would let myself be the woman that cuts away that possibility.

He smells so good though. It's like aromatherapy for me. It makes my insides feel like jelly and my eyelids get heavy. I just need to buy a bottle of concentrated Billy to keep in my pocket for forever, and I'd be fine.

"Good God Giselle your face looks like a tomato!"

Lydia's nose catches during her braying and she snorts so loud I'm surprised she didn't pop a vessel.

"I don't understand what girls find so attractive about Billy, he's a total slob."



My eyes scan the interior of the car again and I can't seem to pinpoint where Max would get that notion from. My brow furrows in confusion and she catches it.

"He only keeps his car clean like this for girls, his room reeks!"

There it is, the stomach dropping sentence. I know he's had a girlfriend since he's been back in town. Apparently, that doesn't matter. He's been womanizing this whole time. I'm simply his next pursuit. The smell in the car turns sour, and a bitter taste fills my mouth. The points on my body that he's touched feel like they have ants all over them, when they once tingled with delight. Bile rises in my throat and gets caught as my nose suddenly closes up. The tears that sting my eyes betray me. There's no reason to be emotional, he would have never been mine in the first place. This should be a lesson to never entertain a man who's in a relationship, because this faux betrayal really burns.

I take the keys in my lap and push them into a spotless, empty cup holder. Avoiding the gaze of the suddenly curious duo behind me. I swipe the back of my hand against my nose and sniff quietly, trying to suppress any notion of feeling.

"Let him know that I'm going home, Lydia, you're okay with riding with Max home right?"

Lydia's large eyes catch the moonlight streaming through the windows. They're concerned yet understanding. That's what's beautiful about the unspoken power of sisters, they can hear your unspoken words when it's most important.

She nods quickly.

"Sure, I'll call mom to pick me up on Sunday."

I don't answer her and push open my door and dart to the security of my not so pristine, junkbox.

Where just a few moments ago I was desperate to see Billy's figure coming from around the corner, I now dread the possibility of catching it. I don't want any confrontation, I don't want to explain

myself. That would mean explaining my feelings, and why they're hurt. Ultimately, there's no reason they should be.

It was just a hug, right?

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Sundays are meant for relaxing, and I initially intended on doing just that. But a sudden burst of mania came in and demanded that I spend the day mulling over some form of art project.

The garage door is open and I'm sitting cross legged on the cement floor. Paint covers my fingers and old jean overalls as I examine the mess that lays before me. I had meant for this to be an abstract piece in the beginning, but at one point the purple blobs reminded me of flowers, so now I've fallen down that rabbit hole.

Every so often both mom and dad will saunter out, with some sort of excuse. Mom's normally pertain to needing to grab something from the outside fridge, dad's are for a random tool. But every time, they both crane their neck casually to see what I'm working on. They don't say anything, but instead hum and nod their heads before walking away.

Every time I produce some form of work, they react as if I was five again, bringing home a piece of macaroni art. They ooh and aah over every little detail, muttering quickly in spanish together over different aspects of it. Neither of them have expressed being talented in any form of art, so they take pride in having a daughter that can spit out decent material.

Mom loves it when I do any sort of flower murals. Her favorite hangs in her room. A few years ago I dedicated a piece to my gramma, after she passed. I took a photo from when she was young, in her thirties, and colorized the portrait. Surrounding her slim frame are an assortment of vibrant spring flowers.

The mess in front of me is just that though, a mess. But my parents

still react the same way, they know that my art takes time to process.

My thin brush traces the colorful blobs with black lines, yearning for everything to take shape. I've settled on a meadow. A rolling meadow on hills as far as the horizon will allow. I must be itching for springtime, especially as the fall wind whips through the space and blows dry leaves around me. Their stiff frames scraping loudly about.

The sound of an obnoxious motor makes my body go stiff and the delicate black line that I was stroking ends in an ugly blotch. Before I even have the ability to stand up and dart inside, the wretched blue thing swings into the driveway. Lydia desperately tries to hop out quickly, embarrassed by the noise, but Billy turns the car off completely.

Lydia's eyes are wide as she approaches and her bag is clutched tightly to her chest. She's trying to tell me something, but I can't really decipher it in my current panic stricken state. She ends up breezing by but still manages a quiet, "ooh pretty." before slamming the door shut behind her.

I can hear Billy's heavy footsteps approaching, and can even smell the pine coming off of him when another gust of wind comes up behind him. My eyes are glued to the canvas on the ground, my hand stalls though. I can't force it to move. He stops at the edge of the garage, where smooth concrete floor meets the rough driveway.

"That's nice."

It's hardly a mumble that escapes his mouth as he lets out a sigh.

My eyes don't move, and I shrug lightly. Finally, my paintbrush moves again, and picks at minimal things on the piece. Things that I'll be painting over anyways. I can't think of doing more than that with him standing above me.

Billy lets out a soft groan and I can hear the fabric of his jeans strain over his knees. There's a rustling of a small cardboard box and a flick of a lighter. Menthol and tobacco fill my nose.

I scrunch my face and lift my head to look at him. He's squatting down, balancing on the balls of his feet, and watching me intently. His eyebrow quirks and he reaches his hand out to me, offering a puff. My head shakes and he pulls back just as swiftly.

I have nothing to say to him. I don't owe him anything, so I wait for him to either speak first, or take the hint and just leave.

Seconds tick by before he eventually clears his throat and flicks away the ash on the end of his stick.

"Silent treatment hmh?"

He takes another long drag and squints his eyes from the smoke. I don't have an answer for him, and I know the scowl on my face is less than inviting. He lets his inhalation lazily creep out of his mouth. My stubbornness must get to him because he grunts again, this time though, he crushes the head of his cigarette into the driveway and rests his forearms lazily on his knees.

"What's the deal? Why'd you run yesterday?"

I don't know why I thought I could get out of having to explain myself. Billy's obviously very forward, and he was going to confront me eventually. I just don't understand why he's so adamant with me. I don't offer him much in any realm.

My paintbrush swirls aggressively in the muddy colored cup of water next to me. The dark pigment seeps out and turns the entire cup black. There was no reason for me to clean my brush, it had far too much paint left on it, but I can't focus on my linework with Billy in front of my face.

Eventually, I muster up the courage to look at his face. His eyes were stern, but otherwise, his features were soft. It was enough to make my insides do a flip. A feeling that I was growing to expect more and more these days.

"I wasn't feeling good."

It's not a complete lie. My emotional state had tanked after Max's comment. There was no way I'd be able to spend one on one time

with him after that point.

His head tilts to the side curiously and I watch his pools of blue flit around the features of my face. When he decides he's analyzed me enough, he kicks a leg out, and lowers himself down into his butt, matching my seating position. Instead of hunching forward, he leans back against his palms while letting his jaw relax.

"That sucks, are you feeling better?"

His voice carried a light load of suspicion, just enough to make it known. He picks at a weed that's growing through the spidering cracks of the ground. The spindling leaves roll between his rough fingers. When he glances down at it, all I can see are his thick lashes and a slightly pouted mouth. He looks somewhat juvenile, pure maybe?

I wipe my soaked brush against the stained towel next to me carefully. The black water seeps into the raised fibers while I spin the handle, forming the bristles into a pointed almond.

"Not entirely."

I mumble softly, keeping my eyes to my already formed brush. I continue to busy myself with twisting it, it's the last form of distraction that I have.

"What would help you feel better?"

He matches my volume, but I can feel his eyes on me again. The color is so intense that I can see them from my peripherals.

"Max told me what she said." he finally admits.

My heart catches in my throat. I'm caught, my ridiculous presumptions have been outed. My chin quivers slightly while I chew on my bottom lip anxiously. There's no avoiding this now.

"You have a girlfriend Billy. It's not appropriate."

I force it out, and quickly realize it was the wrong thing to say. He never indicated that he wanted anything more than a casual dinner

with me. I'm the one who jumped to conclusions, I'm the one that assumed I was just his next chase. Never did he pursue me in that way. The only thing keeping me from running inside is the paralyzation of embarrassment.

"Had, Giselle. Besides, you were dropping hints just as much as I was."

My advances weren't that obvious, if they should be considered advances at all. I was just trying to be civil with him most of the time. I'm stuck on his *had* though. When did he have a chance to break things off with her? He didn't do it for me did he? Would that technically make me a sort of rebound? That's the last thing I want.

My eyes pull up and fall onto the blue body behind him. It's gorgeous in the midday light. Of course any woman that saw it would be instantly drawn to it. He catches my gaze and glances behind him to see what I'm staring at. A sigh escapes his lips and he points towards it.

"That camaro is my fucking baby Giselle. I don't keep it clean for women. I keep it clean because it's an investment... A really fucking expensive investment, and I need to take care of it."

His explanation smacks me like a ton of bricks. Why hadn't the most obvious reason for the state of his vehicle crossed my mind? Did I really take the direction of a teenager? Who was already mocking me for a stupid hug?

The burning sensation spread across my entire face again. This time, it wasn't cute. I was so incredibly embarrassed that I could break down in tears. It takes a few moments in order to compose myself. I avoid direct eye contact with him so that he can't see how pathetic this all is.

"Can you please say something? I'm really trying here."

There's desperation now, which I never thought I'd hear come from his mouth, at least not in regards to me. A shaky breath erupts from my lips.

“I feel better.”

It's not entirely true. Sure, I feel better about not being one of his countless pursuits since he's been home... As far as I'm aware. But he has a track record, and I don't know if I'm ready to get involved with everything that comes with that.

There's a sound of shuffling against the coarse ground in front of me. His low footsteps pass me, then stop at my back. A pair of warm hands find themselves on my shoulders. I don't know if it's the emotional exhaustion, or if I have some sort of mindless attraction to him, but I feel as though I could melt into them and be content forever. My head relaxes and lolls onto his forearm. His pine and tobacco scent is sweet again, the sourness has faded. The heat that comes off of his body as he crouches behind me is delicious. I feel the desire to lean back, and become enveloped by him.

He pushes the tendrils of my hair behind my ear and leans close. His skin brushes against my neck and my breath catches in my throat.

I've never had anyone this close to me in this way before. Sure, I've had boyfriends, and things eventually got as serious as teenage romances do. There were the things that go along with innocence and trying new things. The man that surrounds me now knows exactly what he's doing. His movements are confident and exude experience. There is no pause to make sure he's doing something correctly. He doesn't waver when he brushes his fingers behind my ear, he knows it feels good, and he knows how I should react.

“Dinner tonight? Seven?”

The heat between my legs is unmistakable, as I shiver uncontrollably against his voice. He notices, and lightly trails the backs of his knuckles against my arm, humming while waiting for my confirmation.

I glance at him over my shoulder, and he's intently staring at the painting in front of us. He notices my gaze and his eyes flicker back to me, a sly smile pulling at his mouth while he chuckles gruffly.

“Hmmh?” His nose and lips push into the crook of my neck. My

throat lets out a gravelly noise on it's own, and Billy breathes against my skin harshly in amusement.

"I'll take it as a yes?"

His other hand is rubbing up the small of my back now, and I suddenly realize that his hands are all over me. Delicately trailing on me at different pressure points while he whispers seductively into my neck and ears. If my father were to walk out now, he'd have a fit.

I jolt forward and gasp, the fresh Billy free air helps clear my head. I'm very aware of what my underwear feel like right now, and my pulse slams into my throat.

"Sure. Yes, seven. Seven is fine." I manage it out through guttural chokes.

He shifts to stand behind me and brings his hand down into view, offering to help me up. I glance between his outstretched palm and his face, and take his offering. That mischievous flicker crosses his irises again as he pulls me up abruptly, and I'm unable to catch my footing. He's played this game far too long and I manage to land against his chest, completely enveloped in his arms.

I must look pathetic, I'm a fumbling mess in his grasp, just like every other girl I've seen around him. His eyes don't make me feel like prey though. They don't look at me like they did when he would look at other women.

He brings a firm grip up to the nape of my neck, jutting my face upwards, as he swiftly brings his mouth to where my jaw and earlobe meet. My eyes flutter shut and I suddenly realize that I'm putty in his hands now. He can jerk me around however and I'd be okay with it.

"Tonight it is then." It's a low growl that escapes just before he places the most delicate kiss onto the bit of face in front of my ear.

He releases me just as quickly as he had grabbed me and winks slyly before he turns back towards the investment in the driveway.

I stand in shock, suddenly cold with his lack of presence, when the garage door opens. Dad's head peers out and he catches the



movement of Billy lowering himself into the driver's seat. He throws a suspicious look in my direction.

“Who's that?”

## 8. Chapter 8

Lydia eyes my face in the mirrored reflection. She's perched on the edge of my bed, swinging her legs lazily. Her head cocks to the side while I swipe on my mascara.

"So how'd this end up happening?"

She's never had a male interest, as far as I know, so I'm sure this entire experience is intriguing to her. Billy and I's dizzying history likely doesn't help either.

"Honestly, even I'm not a hundred percent sure."

I really have no idea how I ended up in this predicament. It was just a month ago that I had completely forgotten that Billy existed, and he likely has the same story about me.

Lydia squints at me suspiciously.

"Are you two boyfriend and girlfriend now?"

My instant reaction is to throw my head back and laugh, but from the glare that I receive in return, I realize it isn't a joke.

I force the lump in my throat down, and look at her through the

mirror.

“No, we’re not.”

“But I thought only couples went on dates?”

I don’t necessarily have a desire to explain the complications of the dating/fling scene of adulthood to my kid sister, but I suppose she needs to learn it from somewhere.

“Not always Lydia, sometimes it’s just so people get to know each other... I don’t think this is really a date anyways. Think of it as two friends catching up.”

Even I know that’s not at all what it is... But in turn, what would I actually classify this as?

“You don’t wear makeup when you just go out with friends.”

She has a good point, and I suddenly feel the burning swirl of self consciousness in my belly. My reflection paints my concerned expression, and my eyes flit over back to Lydia.

“Should I take it off?”

She shakes her head quickly, realizing the inner turmoil she’s caused,

and backtracks.

“No, it looks nice. You just don’t do it often.”

I look back at myself and can’t help but wonder if I’m doing too much. My dark lashes are lifted and flared out. They encircle my normally dull, brown eyes, and make them suddenly noticeable. My skin is thankfully pretty clear, so there wasn’t a real need for foundation. The eyeliner that I’ve swiped on isn’t raccoon like, even though that’s in fashion these days. It just doesn’t really suit me. As for lips, I’ve never been one for bold colors, so I just put on some clear gloss. It admittedly looks abnormal to me, but my lips do look nice...

“What’re you going to wear?”

Lydia’s voice brings my attention away from my over analyzation, and I realize that I didn’t really think that far ahead. I don’t really have a ton to choose from though.

“I’m not sure, what do you think?”

Lydia sighs and pulls open my closet door. Her eyes scan over everything, she makes weird faces, and every so often a content expression appears.

“Well I guess it depends on what kind of meeting this is going to be.”

She says while rubbing a stray shirt's fabric between her fingers.

"Just two... friends? Having dinner."

I confirm again, even less confident than the first time. Lydia knows me better than most, and tosses a doubtful look in my direction. She turns her attention back to the closet and slides garments around aggressively, then gasps.

"This one!"

She pulls out a light pink oversized knit dress. It's only long enough to hit right below my bottom, and I sometimes get self conscious while just wearing leggings underneath it.

"I don't know Lydia, that's not really something I'm comfortable in."

Her eyes roll so hard that I'm positive she just saw her brain.

"You're only comfortable in pajama pants and big shirts Giselle, wear this and some boots. You'll look great!"

I open my mouth to protest again, when mom calls from the front door.

“Lydia, come on! We’re about to leave!”

Lydia lays the dress onto the bed gently, and gives me a stern look.

“Wear it.”

She points a warning finger at me before yanking the bedroom door open and leaving. After a few minutes of mumbling as everyone confirms that they have everything, the front door closes, and there’s nothing but silence in the house.

I turn back to the dress on the bed in front of me. Maybe Lydia’s right, maybe it will look fine. I let out a deep sigh and pull off my shirt, but before putting on the dress, I turn to look at myself in the mirror. Normally, I get sad when I do, but this time, a warm spread of confidence tingles through my body. I’ve put on my best underwear, not because I expect anyone to see it, but just so I can give myself that extra edge. A secret that only I know. My bra lifts my breasts up perfectly, they don’t look like two round orbs sitting high on my chest, but they don’t tug aggressively at my shoulders. They’re cradled gracefully, balancing my frame nicely. My waist looks small in comparison to my hips, and gives a sexy hourglass impression. Maybe the dress won’t be so bad.

I pull it on and feel a twinge of sadness that it doesn’t show off every dip and curve, but maybe that’s not a bad thing since we’ll be eating tonight. It does still show how nice my chest looks right now, and still dips in at the waist some, so I’m not entirely shapeless. After wiggling into my black leggings and long boots, I take a final look at myself in the mirror. My dark hair contrasts heavily to the light pink

dress, and I smooth down every stray hair I see.

The clock on my wall shows that it's 6:52, and a firm knock sounds on the front door. My heart immediately jumps, and I can't help but feel slightly panicked. What if he doesn't like what I'm wearing? Should I care that much about what he thinks? How serious is he about this outing? He seemed pretty serious when he was feeling me up earlier today, but was that really what he was trying to say?

There isn't much time to overthink, because he knocks again. He's definitely a persistent man.

I walk through the hallway quickly and put my hand on the doorknob. After taking in a deep and shaky breath, I muster a small smile and open the door.

Billy's on the other side, and his appearance is jaw dropping. What I can't help but notice immediately, is the dark look that crosses his eyes the moment he sees me. A sly grin comes over his mouth as he eyes my features up and down.

"Well, don't you clean up nice?"

My burning cheeks will never fail to give me away, and I purposely didn't apply blush today because of them.

"Thank you... you look nice too."

He looks so much more than nice though, he's breathtaking.

His curls are styled neatly. The sides of his head are trimmed and lined up cleanly. He's traded his jean jacket for a black leather one, over a maroon button up. The top button is undone, and flashes the smallest peek of chest hair. It's tucked into his dark wash jeans that fit every bit of him perfectly.

He's certainly progressed from high school. While he normally would wear similar clothing, he doesn't have the buttons obnoxiously undone all the way to the middle of his belly.

"Are you ready to go?" He asks as he braces his weight against the door jam and watches my movements intently.

I do a quick runover of myself, I have my keys and my pepper spray tucked in my purse. As nice as he's been recently, I'll never allow myself to not be prepared if anything went south.

I nod, and step out to close the door, but he doesn't move like I expected him to. He's entirely in my personal space, and my nose is flooded with his pine smell. My arm brushes against his chest as I turn to grab the handle. He's incredibly warm, and his body is firm and unforgiving while I nudge past.

"I don't think I've seen you in anything so light, it suits you well."



He casually says while he lightly pinches a portion of bunched fabric on my arm. His movements are fluid as he slides his palm up the back of my arm and down my spine, stopping just at the small of my back.

My heart beat is pounding hard in my neck while I fumble with the key and lock. I'm sure he can hear it, and something tells me this won't be the first time I'll be feeling this way tonight. We're less than five minutes into seeing each other and I'm already an anxious mess.

He notices my inability to get the key lined up and lifts his free hand to mine, steadying my aim. Our hands vibrate as the key passes through the ridged notches in the lock, until there's none left to push through. We stand still for a second and he lowers his hand from mine slowly, but watches intently while I twist my wrist and pull the key back out.

His presence on my back nudges to the side, directing me to turn with him, and I obey with no resistance. As we walk to the car, I'm suddenly aware of how noisy it is. The frogs are calling to each other and crickets sing their nightly song. Billy's hand slides to my side and pulls me against his hip as we pass my junkbox, so I don't clip the mirror. Being tucked into his side is comforting, like nothing can ever get me as long as I'm right here.

Billy opens the passenger door of his freshly cleaned Camaro for me, and I feel his eyes linger while I climb in and adjust myself. My immediate instinct is to shrivel inwards, and hunch my shoulders to hide my chest and belly. But I refrain and smile slightly at him, mouthing a quiet thank you before he winks and closes the door.

As he rounds the front bumper, I take it as my turn to appreciate the

view, in a way that's less obvious. He obviously prides himself in his physique, and a wave of self consciousness crashes over me at the thought... What will strangers think when they see us together? He belongs with someone who's equally as physically toned, not a girl who's made of squish.

He swings open his door and settles into his seat with an audible grunt. My mind can't help but take it to another scene for just a second, before reeling it all back into reality. He turns the ignition and the car rumbles to life as he looks over at me. That mischievous sparkle in his eyes presents itself again, and my previous concerns flush away.

"So tell me, what's the rating right now hunger wise?"

He asks me in a tone that's sincere, like he's genuinely concerned about feeding me. It makes me feel a little more confident in his overall intentions with everything.

Admittedly, I could eat, but I know the moment I get in front of food with Billy here, I'll just end up picking at it.

"I'd say about a three."

Billy's intensity doesn't waver while he scans my face. I struggle to swallow under his watchful eyes, but after a few moments, he's satisfied and sighs.

“Well shit, I’m starving. How does Paul’s sound?”

Paul’s is a small burger place stuck in the 60s. It’s cute, and tends to be the go to spot for people our age. A bubbling feeling of worry builds up at the prospect of running into someone we may know there. Against my gnawing thoughts, I nod my head and muster a close lipped smile.

“Sure, Paul’s sounds good.”

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We pull up to the neon lit storefront, and realize that we obviously weren’t the only ones who thought this was a good place to eat. The lot is jammed full of cars, and Billy finds one open spot tucked away towards the back of the building.

I look over at him as he turns off the ignition, and notice that his eyes are trained on the rearview mirror. His face stays blank, and I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but his lax demeanor he had on the way here has fizzled away. There’s something wrong, and it has to do with being here.

“We don’t have to eat here, I’m okay with anywhere really.”

I offer it as an attempt to put him at ease.

His eyes blink hard before he directs them to me. When they fall on my face, his own softens again, and he smiles gently.

“It’s always this busy, we’ll get a table pretty quickly.”

Either he completely missed why I offered or he doesn’t care, but either way he’s already opened the door and stretching out of his seat to head my way. I notice that he’s still peering at something behind us as he rounds the front, but blinks it off when he reaches my side.

The door opens and he reaches a large palm in to help me out. I normally wouldn’t take it, but his damn car is so low to the ground it would actually help a lot. His fingers wrap around mine gingerly while he lifts me up. He reaches behind me to nudge my door closed, and only pulls back enough to have his hand clamp against my waist. His grip is more firm now than it was at the house, and I glance up at him to see if I can have better luck at reading his expression.

I don’t.

Billy opens the front door and walks in, chatting quietly with the hostess, who advises there’s a short wait.

My arm is pinned awkwardly between our two torsos, and the only way I can relieve it is by wrapping it against his back. The muscles at his flanks soften at the presence of my palm, and he squeezes his arm around me tighter for a moment.

We appear far too intimate. I *feel* far too intimate for the little time we've spent together. That familiar self conscious feeling crashes over me when I catch the gaze of two blonde, thin women our age. A wrinkle creases over their noses at their obvious denial of Billy and I. They exchange a look with each other and snicker silently, then return their sights back on us.

My cheeks get hot instantly, and I pull my arm from Billy's back and slip out of his grip. He throws a confused look at me, and recognises the red on my face. His eyebrows pull together as he scans the room, determined to find what's upset me.

He was already on edge when we arrived, maybe those girls were the ones he was worried about.

But he manages to glance over them with little regard, so they must not be what he's suspecting. By now, I've crossed my arms tight against my chest, attempting to make myself smaller. As if that would somehow make people think that I was.

He rounds the room one last time with his eyes. Just as he passes the pair, one raises an eyebrow and winks at him. All the more humiliating that she would have the gall to do it in front of me. His forehead creases further, as he looks at her like she's stray gum stuck on his shoe. It makes her mouth gape like a fish while her friend gives a dirty look back.

Billy brings his attention back to me, having to look down due to our close proximity.

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

He keeps his voice low, but that doesn’t interfere with his tone. It’s serious and concerned.

I open my mouth to respond, yet can’t really come up with anything to say that doesn’t make me sound clingy. Thankfully the hostess taps Billy’s shoulder to indicate that a table is ready, and it dissolves the encounter. She escorts us to an empty booth and places two menus in front of us.

He picks his up without hesitation and starts scanning it intently. I leave mine where it is and peer at the front. It’s got the normal specials, and it looks like today’s is a burger, shake, and fry meal.

A male waiter walks up casually, his tag says his name is Alexander. He admittedly doesn’t look like the type to work in this line of business, he’s muscular and has dark features. Definitely someone that I’d like to talk to, but would think he’s far too out of my league.

Billy is wound tighter than I’ve ever seen him. His hands are clasped together firmly under his chin and watches Alexander closely.

Alexander’s eyes flit back and forth between Billy and I, then raises an eyebrow towards Billy.

“What’re you drinking tonight?”

He clears his throat into his fist and mumbles awkwardly.

“Coke.”

Alexander's stare lingers far too long on Billy, his eyes squinting slightly before he turns his entire front in my direction then smiles.

“What can I get for you doll?”

I smile politely and ask for a water. To which he nods and retreats quickly.

Billy watches him disappear behind the swinging kitchen doors and looks back my way, a grimace covering his expression.

“What do you think you'll end up getting?”

I glance down at the menu again but already know my answer.

“Probably just some fries.”

Billy opens his mouth to question me when Alexander comes back with our drinks. He gingerly places mine in front of me and carelessly

slides Billy's in front of him. It sloshes and spills some of its contents on the table.

"Sorry about that killer."

The half assed apology is obvious, and it's amplified when he doesn't offer any sort of cleaning assistance.

Billy glowers and rips a napkin free from the holder. Meanwhile Alexander focuses his attention onto me by leaning his back against the table and turning to speak to me. Billy has no way of seeing his face.

"What're you gonna be eating tonight?"

He bites his lip casually while he watches me flounder. He's got some guts to openly flirt with me in front of a potential date.

I'm flustered and can't seem to be able to articulate that I just want a plate of damn fries. Billy's seething can be felt across the table, and for once, I'm begging that he intervenes.

Alexander takes note of my inability to speak and leans down to point to the menu with his pen. He's in my personal space, and I realize that it isn't nearly as nice as when Billy did it. His dark eyes look up at me as he's level with my face now. He's speaking about something on the menu, but I can't hear him over the roaring blood in my ears. My face must be beet red, and I want him to back up, to



give me some air.

A firm hand grips my upper arm and pulls to slide me out of the booth. I scramble and snatch my handbag just as my butt leaves the seat. I'm already across the dining room when Alexander registers that I'm no longer there.

"Hey Hargrove! The coke isn't free!"

Billy doesn't respond and continues on his set path, willing to steamroll anyone that steps in his way. The fresh air hits me as we breeze through the front door and helps subside my dizziness. When we reach the camaro, my arm is suddenly released and I almost stumble forward from the lack of support.

"Get in."

Billy directs me as he opens my door.

As much as I'd like to stand outside and argue about the lack of dinner, or his sudden barking command, I'm grateful that he took me from that claustrophobic situation. So I do as he instructs and lower myself into the seat. Billy sticks his body in through my side and pushes the keys into the ignition.

I'm aware of his body leaning onto me, and his weight is far too enticing. He's warm all over and smells so good, which is such an odd thought to have in this weird of a position.

He twists the key and brings the monster to life. As he pulls back to get out my door, he stops in front of me. He places his palms against the shoulders of the seat, trapping me in place.

“Give me just a few minutes Giselle.”

The sound of my name from his mouth in that way sends shivers down my spine. He’s irritated and stern, not at me, but on my behalf.

He closes my door and walks behind the car, back to where he was eyeing when we arrived. In the side mirror I can see that he’s headed towards the dumpsters. A street lamp casts an eerie yellow glow over them.

Alexander is standing just below it, smoking a cigarette and eyeing the man approaching him.

My heart drops... I don’t want another pumpkin patch scenario.

## 9. Chapter 9

I'm conflicted with what I'm seeing. Part of me wants to run out and drag Billy away, the waiter was just being a douche, there's no need for further altercation. The other part of me wants to stay put, and do as he asked.

But since when am I one to actually listen when someone tells me to do something? I scramble at my seat belt buckle, and glance up to make sure nothing significant has happened yet. Once I finally free the latch I look back up, my hand is on the door handle when I stop. The two are just... talking?

Billy's standing to the side with his arms crossed firmly against his chest. He doesn't look happy, but he hasn't resorted to involving himself physically. Alexander's expression looks bored, he rolls his eyes at something Billy's said and flicks his ash. Billy frees a hand and I feel my breath catch, but he uses it to snatch the cigarette from Alexander's fingers and tosses it on the ground. He crushes it with his boot and starts digging in again.

Instead of looking concerned, Alexander studies Billy's face for a moment, and a wild smile crosses his face. His eyes crinkle and he says something while laughing. He nudges Billy in the chest and laughs harder. I'm certain that it'll make Billy react, but again he proves me wrong. His own face softens while his shoulders shudder with laughter.

At this point, I have no idea what's going on, and my stomach growls a hungry complaint. A prickling irritation climbs up my spine, I'm not typically one to get hangry, but this emotional whirlwind has really caused some turmoil.

The pair chat for a brief moment more, and I watch as Alexander hooks his arm around the back of Billy's neck and pulls him down playfully. Billy's grunt is loud enough to hear over the rumbling engine, yet he submits and lets his hair get destroyed. It's amazing, since I've always known Billy to never let his hair go out of place. Eventually he's had enough and shoves Alexander away. He smooths his clothes back down while Alexander continues to pester him

verbally. Billy shakes his head and starts back towards the car, flicking Alexander off along the way. What he says is unintelligible, but it makes Alexander laugh and wave him away.

I have to compose my face before he gets here, because I'm absolutely floored. I've never seen Billy be the beta in an interaction. He's the alpha. Always. Pigs would fly before Billy would ever submit to someone else.

He opens the door and slides into his seat casually, but his chest rises and falls at an elevated pace. His hair is wild, which is a look that I'm not that upset about. He looks disheveled, like he's off balance. It's a side I've never been introduced to before, and admittedly I'd like to get to know it more.

He lets out a heavy sigh and looks over my way. His eyes are bright, they smile even though his face doesn't. He's attempting to compose himself in front of me, like I didn't just have a full view of what happened.

"Do you know that guy?"

It's obvious that he does, but it seems like such a weird relationship. For Alexander to move in so heavily on someone that Billy was out with is dirty. But then again, was it just a joke? Was this all some sort of cruel way to mess with me, to watch me squirm?

Billy can't seem to keep his creeping grin at bay and laughs a deep, genuine laugh.

"Yeah, you could say that."

I wait for him to explain further, but he doesn't. I was almost sent into a panic attack over Alexander's actions, I would assume that I at least deserve some sort of reasoning for all of it.

My stomach complains again, this time loud enough for both of us to hear. Billy's demeanor changes instantly and his face softens.

"Oh shit Giselle I'm sorry, do you want to go back in?"

The irritation spiders from my neck to my arms and face. I don't

understand what just happened between Billy and Alexander. I'm frustrated that I was made to feel so uncomfortable for what I'm suspecting was someone's amusement. I'm hungry and maybe that's clouding my normal rationale, but I'd really like to just go home. I'm drained, and on the verge of crying for reasons I can't really explain.

My neck flexes at the growing lump in my throat and tears sting my eyes. I shake my head in response.

"Can you just take me home please".

My voice sounds like a frog has lodged itself in my trachea.

Billy's expression collapses further while he attempts to assuage the situation. He watches me silently, and his direct attention makes my face burn hotter than ever before.

"Are you upset?"

I turn my head to look out the window, but the low glow from inside the car against the black outside creates a mirror effect. There's not really a way to explain how uncomfortable I feel in the moment. I'm ultimately triggered by my inability to enjoy myself despite the actions of others, but he wouldn't understand that.

"I just don't feel very well."

Billy's brow furrows tightly as he attempts to examine my face in the blurry reflection. He eventually lets out a sigh and grabs his wallet from the center console.

"I'll be right back."

He opens his door and leaves me alone for the second time tonight. I try desperately to keep my eyes from streaming and ruining my makeup. I'm not just some sort of toy to play with. Fuck Alexander for making me anxious when I'm supposed to be having a nice time. Screw Billy for acting like nothing happened, just like he did years ago.

I pick at the fresh nailpolish on my fingers. White chips rain down, leaving my nails ugly and jagged. I want more than anything to crawl

in bed and forget about all of this, to forget that I ever thought Billy and I could be involved.

It feels like forever has passed when the door opens again. It still ends up making me jump and the thoughts in my head jumble around. The smell of fried food fills the cab and my stomach feels like it's twisting around itself. I suck in hard to try and muffle the noise that erupts from it.

Billy chuckles while reaching into the bag. He gingerly places a warm styrofoam container on my lap. I look down at it and get the conflicting feelings again. It was nice of him to get me food, but it still doesn't help what happened.

"He's an old friend. We were absolute douchebags together. I feel like I've changed some... He hasn't changed at all."

I glance up from the white box to look at him, but he hasn't turned to me. He keeps his eyes on the bag in his lap.

"For a while he was kind of like an older brother, and still sees himself that way. I guess I do too, but I don't look up to him like I used to. He thinks it's funny to piss me off, he likes the reaction he gets."

My fingers pick at the styrofoam. I can feel my eyebrows pulling together.

"That's not fair to me Billy. It was at my expense, I'm not a plaything."

He grabs my hand suddenly, and when I look up he's got that intensity in his eyes.

"I know Giselle, that's why I took you out. I forgot he was working today, and I really hoped he wouldn't make a scene."

As much as his story makes sense, it doesn't do much to help with my withering self confidence. Sure, Alexander was cute, and I suppose I was somewhat flattered by his advances. But now that I have the confirmation that it was just a game... It feels just like it did when school boys would ask me out on a dare.

“For what it’s worth, he really thinks you’re a catch. He told me if things didn’t work out between us to give him your number.”

Billy snorts like it’s absurd.

“And what’d you say?”

I realize that I shouldn’t prod into it. That it makes me look desperate in a way. But I’d really like to know.

He pauses suddenly, like he’s holding his breath. Maybe he’s contemplating on whether he should answer truthfully. I pray that he does, because I’d really like to know what he thinks about all of this. His cheeks get pink when I look at his face, and he coughs awkwardly into his fist.

“I told him uh ‘only in his wet dreams’”.

I can’t help the laugh that erupts from my throat, and it seems to help Billy loosen up. His shoulders relax and he matches my smile.

My stomach interrupts by groaning yet again, and I physically wince at the pain it causes.

“Please eat your food. Your stomach sounds like it’s gonna shrivel up here soon.”

He puts his own food on the floorboard in the backseat and starts up the car. I look at him and raise an eyebrow, confused about where we’re going. I realize that maybe he’s still taking me home, which I’ll admit I don’t really want to happen anymore.

“Have you seen that movie Beetlejuice, yet?”

He asks casually.

I’ve never really had the attention span for movies, so I don’t actively go and spend money on them.

“No”

I shake my head while I nibble on my fry.

“Hollow park is doing a drive in showing tonight.”

Drive-in movies haven't been a thing for years. They do specials for the community every so often, but that concept is over ten years old. It's something my parents did when they were younger.

“That sounds fun.”

Billy's eyes slide my way and he smiles as he pulls onto the main road.

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Thanks to Billy's lead foot, we were able to make it to the screening with five minutes to spare. We pull into one of the few empty spots left in the lot, and he turns the engine off. He focuses intently on the radio knobs, hunting for the right station that doesn't give too much static. When he's satisfied he leans back, and stretches his arms hard enough to make his shoulders pop.

He looks over and watches while I take the last bite of the fry in my hand. I notice his gaze and grab another one, offering it in his direction. He smiles lightly and shakes his head. I don't eat it, because I really don't want to be examined while doing so.

“I thought you said you were starving?”

I decide it's my turn to be snarky and poke fun at Billy. His smile widens and he shakes his head dismissively.

“I am, you're just a little distracting.”

What does that mean?

He moves and reaches an arm back behind my seat to grab his own food. His chest pushes into my side and he curses quietly. It must've shifted in the drive and is all the way by the rear door. He uses his other hand to stabilize himself on the armrest. I notice the muscles in his hands and forearm flex under the pressure of his weight and suck in a breath. I've never been so attracted to something trivial like that.

He eventually snags the box and slides back into his spot. The movie



intro begins and the park lights turn off, leaving nothing but the moon and movie screen as a means to see anything. Billy eats his food quickly and silently, while his eyes are trained on the screen. I've opted to leave my sandwich alone, as it's too messy to deal with, and I'm prone to spills.

Like usual, I end up getting a bit bored with the movie, and it hasn't even been twenty minutes. I've found myself glancing over in Billy's direction more times than I'd like to admit. The white glow of the screen makes his features look chiseled. He ends up catching me the fifth or sixth time I do it and smirks.

"The movie's that way hon."

He whispers like we're in an actual theater, and not in the privacy of his car. It's so dark that he likely can't see my burning cheeks, and I can only wag my head and look back at the screen.

He hasn't turned back though. His eyes are still on the side of my face. He eventually moves and grunts while he shifts the center armrest up, revealing a middle seat between us. I try my best to pretend like I haven't noticed, until I feel his arm wrap around my waist and slide me into him. He moves me as if I weigh no more than a couple pounds.

His warmth envelopes around my body and I sink lower into it, suddenly aware of his hand gripping the side of my thigh. It keeps me in place directly next to him. I rest my head against his chest and can hear the beating of his heart. His breathing gets deeper and more methodic as I'm against him.

He popped in a stick of gum after he finished his food, so his breath is minty and inviting. His jaw nudges up and down against the top of my head while he chews.

A sudden scare scene makes me jump, and I feel Billy's body tense up too. He still manages a chuckle and tilts his head down in my ear.

"You're pretty jumpy aren't you?"

He twists a finger in my side and I let out a squeal before clamping

my mouth shut. I crane my neck up to see his face, and he's got a wicked smile pulling over his teeth.

I wince in anticipation for him to do it again, but he seems to be content and spares me. Instead, he places his hand back on my thigh and squeezes firmly when he scoots me back into place. His thumb brushes back and forth lightly over the stretched fabric of my leggings.

Even if I didn't have an attention issue with movies I'd be distracted by Billy. Every movement he makes sends crackles of electricity around the point of contact. His mere thumb movements gradually transition into his palm rubbing back and forth in place, and then into full slides up and down my leg. As much as the anxiety in me wants to push his hand away, there's that bit of heat that overpowers and wants more.

I end up rolling over to my side to cuddle into him more, to which he assists by lifting my leg by the back of my knee. I'm curled up into this man so much that one would think we've been together for years.

His hand glides up the back of my thigh, stopping just below my butt and down again to the back of my knee. I take a mental note that just because it's out on display, he isn't taking it as permission to go crazy. It's comforting and helps me relax into him further.

Almost immediately, his hand moves up but doesn't stop. It glides up my butt and my back, hooking into the nape of my neck just as he did earlier today. I look up to see that he hasn't quite looked my way, and is just then pulling his eyes away from the screen to face me. I anticipate his smirk, but it doesn't appear. He keeps his face even, yet his eyes are burning, and I can hear his heart pound.

He releases my neck and slides his hand down to the small of my back and opts to pinch my chin with his other hand, lifting it up gently. I watch the pools of blue close softly, realizing it's the gentlest thing I've witnessed him do. I mimic his movements and feel his lips press against mine. They're soft and cautious, testing my comfort levels.

His fingers unpinch my chin and instead travel up the curve of my jaw. I relax against his touch and he takes it as a sign to push forward. His tongue pushes apart my lips and pulls me in deeper. I sigh against him and push my hand against his chest to climb up higher, to get closer. He groans into my mouth and hoists me up to make me level with him. We're chest to chest, pulled so close that the fabric between us is red hot.

The tip of his tongue traces across my bottom lip in a way that sends a physical shiver through my body. I can feel his mouth pull into a smile at my reaction, while his hand grazes up and down my sides. Every so often he grips at my waist and grumbles, pulling our lower halves together desperately.

A hard rapping smacks against the window. I instantly push myself off of him, even though we've obviously been caught. I'm suddenly aware of how my lips pulse from the lack of pressure and I bite my bottom lip to try and assuage it.

Billy looks just as frazzled as I do, but also looks like he's ready to wring someone's neck. He rolls down the window to find a stout woman with a bright flashlight beaming into the cab. Billy seethes and raises a hand to block his eyes.

"This is a family event. Kids are here. Control yourselves."

She rattles it off like she's said it a hundred times, but doesn't fail to leave out the judgmental tone.

Billy nods his head with a pained grimace.

"Sure, fine. Sorry."

She lets out a heavy sigh and shakes her head before wandering back to wherever she came from.

The window creaks back up slowly and Billy swings his head back in my direction. A stupid smile pulls at his slightly swollen mouth, then sits back against the door with his arm outstretched over the back of the seats. He waves his hand, beckoning me to curl up into him as I was before, and I nervously look around to see if anyone's watching.

“They’re not gonna gripe if we’re just sitting here.”

His attempts at reasoning aren’t the strongest, but I’d rather be curled up next to him again. Even though we were on opposite sides of the cab just an hour or so ago, it feels foreign now.

The issue is though, that if I go over to him, I’ll only want to continue what was interrupted.

A wave of rationale slaps me in the face.

This is technically a first date, I can’t throw myself all over him in a desperate fashion... What happened to not being another one of his ventures?

“Gettin a little cold here Giselle.”

He juts out his bottom lip dramatically while his arm still hangs outspread, waiting for me to fill the space.

There’s nothing wrong with sitting close together, we can take things slow. I can control myself to take things slow.

A small smile creeps up on me, and I give in. I scoot my bottom sideways along the seats, and he grabs my waist again to help. The heat envelopes me again, and we watch Winona Ryder fly.

## 10. Chapter 10

### Summary for the Chapter:

Hello everyone! I apologize for my absence... Winter is a tough season for everyone, add COVID changes to it and there's a ton of stuff to mull over. I've had a change in schooling, and hopefully career come my skills exams this Tuesday. I hope you all are doing lovely and staying healthy and happy. This isn't a promise that I'll post regularly again, considering the job situation. But we'll see! I read over this story and sort of fell in love with it all over again. Thanks for reading!

xoxo- JustHargroveThings

“Hey there sleepy head.”

A gentle voice cracks through my consciousness and my eyes flutter open. I look around to see that we're still in the dark car cab, and the movie screen is rolling through credits.

I force away the immediate urge to rub my fists against my eyes, remembering that I've applied makeup. Instead, I blink hard a few times and look up at the man wrapped around me.

“You talk in your sleep you know that?”

Horror swipes over my face. I don't remember any dreams that I had, but I can only imagine that I could say the worst.

Billy laughs and traces my jaw lightly.

“Don't worry, it didn't sound like you were doing anything too exciting.”

A wave of relief floods over me. My dreams can tend to get pretty messy, and it would have been horrific to verbalize them without consciousness.

I let out a groan and sit up, then turn to face him.

“So what are we doing now?”

A puzzled look takes over Billy’s face, and he chuckles in surprise.

“I don’t know, I guess I didn’t really have anything planned after this.”

Looking at the clock, it’s just past ten, on a Saturday. People our age are supposed to be out having fun. But then again, there’s only so much that one can do in Hawkins.

A disappointed huff heaves from my chest.

“I don’t understand why anyone would want to live here. I’m baffled that you decided to come back.”

My bitter attitude is showing and I have to remind myself that it isn’t particularly ladylike.

Billy snickers quietly,

“You sure do get fired up don’t you?” He pauses for a beat before continuing. “Trust me, I would’ve stayed in California if I could’ve.”

My ears perk in interest while I turn to face him. Admittedly I’m the nosiest person I know, aside from Lydia.

“What was it like... being that close to an ocean?”

The expression that takes over his face is enough to break my heart. It’s a mix of nostalgia, hurt, and longing. He takes in a deep breath and exhales slowly.

“Better than I could ever explain.”

My head tilts sideways, and he notices that I’m wanting more.

“The air is salty. You can smell it, taste it, feel it on your skin when you go back inside.” His nostrils flare like he’s trying to smell it again, even though we’re thousands of miles away. “I swear when

you walk into the water, your skin tingles at first. People called me crazy for saying it, but I can't explain it any other way. And when the waves crash into your body, the force is inexplicable. Some of them were strong enough to knock me off of my feet."

I imagine the sight of Billy getting tossed sideways by a rogue wave. The way the water would drip from his curls when he emerged. How his smile would be so wide and sudden that it'd reach his eyes, the one I've only seen flashes of.

"That's a good explanation."

His eyes are on the side of my face now, and I can't bring myself to look at him. I can feel their intensity, this moment feels more emotional than normal for Billy.

"That doesn't give it nearly enough justice Giselle, you have to experience it for yourself."

My lips curl inside my mouth while I nod slowly. The beach seems to be his happy place, and I would be lying if I said that I wasn't a little jealous that he'd found his. While I continue to flounder to keep myself sane in this helltown.

"I'd love to do that."

I finally will myself to look at him, and he hasn't moved. His eyes begin their scan over my face as they normally do. They flick slightly as they investigate every feature. When he's satisfied he lets out a sigh.

"We will, soon."

Not allowing me to respond, he turns the keys and the engine roars over any thoughts that I could verbalize. They continue to roll through my head though, the externally silent dysfunction screams.

*Maybe he meant 'we' as in we both will eventually on our own time. Don't be silly Giselle, he didn't mean that you would go together, you hardly know the man. Then again, he has been awfully forward this entire time. That's such an absur-*

“Those gears are really turning over something aren’t they?”

A hushed exhale pushes from my lungs as I look up at Billy’s profile. He keeps his eyes on the road and is casually driving with one hand clamped on the top of the steering wheel.

“You’re chewing on your cheek.”

He smirks coolly and glances in my direction to make sure I’m listening.

“You tend to do that when your eyes space out. Then you seem to come up with an elaborate conclusion to whatever minute thing I’ve said.”

My eyebrows drop from their lifted position swiftly. He pays more attention to what I do than I had originally anticipated. How do I even respond to that? Before I can come up with something, we pull up to a red light at an empty four-way intersection. He turns his torso towards me and rests his forearm on the steering wheel.

“I enjoy spending time with you, don’t overthink what I say if you can manage. I end up losing the present Giselle.”

Again, I try to configure a good response to this, but the light turns green. Within a second he’s back in his original seated position and focusing on the road again.

We sit in silence for a few beats and I get an overwhelming feeling of being a bit of an ass.

*Why can’t you just enjoy the moments you’re having There’s no need to overthink every little thing he’s saying to you. He’s trying to be an accommodating date and you’re acting like a-*

“Gisellllleeeee.”

Billy’s crooning pulls me back out again. It’s enough of an embarrassment to make my cheeks flush. There’s no way he’s gonna want a second date at this rate.

“You sure are flighty aren’t you?”



I suck in a breath and release it slowly.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be.”

He looks like he wants to respond, but is distracted by the tediousness of the stop signs in my neighborhood. When we finally pull into my driveway, he turns to face me again.

“Don’t be sorry, I like spending time with you. I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.”

He reaches across the center console and pinches my chin again. I think I’ve decided that it’s one of my favorite things that he does.

His mouth is pulled into a tight line while he inspects my eyes, like he’s trying to read what they’re saying. His lips part to say something while he takes in a shaky breath.

A knock on the window interrupts us for the second time tonight, and he looks like he’s prepared to kill whoever is on the other side. It doesn’t make it any better that it’s his sister’s best friend, who irritates the shit out of him regularly these days.

She goes as far as to press her nose up against the glass and cackle at our faces. Mine is more surprised than Billy’s look of death.

“Giselle! Dad wants to meet Billyyyyy!”

My face drops in horror, and I’m sure Billy’s behind me has too. I immediately grit my teeth and jut my finger at her.

“I told you to keep your mouth shut!”

Lydia paints a mock pained face and dramatically clutches her heart.

“I would never lie to my parents, what do you take me for?”

I don’t play along and her face drops into an anaumsed droop while shrugging.

“They asked and knew I was lying when I said you went out with friends. They said, and I quote, ‘Giselle doesn’t have friends like

that.”

Nice to know that my parents are all too familiar with my social life, or lack thereof. Feeling defeated I turn slowly to face Billy, preparing myself for the ultimate rejection. This was surely nice while it lasted.

His mouth was slightly open in surprise, as expected, but he composed himself quickly. The embarrassment that I'm currently feeling outshines all others that I've felt in his presence.

“Sure, uhm. Yeah, sure I can come in.”

My eyebrows pull together even harder.

“Billy you don't have to, it's kind of a lot after just hanging out once.”

He shakes his head dismissively and pushes his door open before I can argue any further.

“I've already met him anyway, remember? At work.”

-----  
If you would have told me that I'd be sitting in the living room formally introducing Billy Hargrove to my parents as a potential suitor I would have called you a liar.

Yet here he sits, across the living room from my father, who's promised he'd personally castrate any man who wronged me. The heat is surely on my cheeks while I panic internally.

We've gone through the basic pleasantries and introductions. Which I attempted to promptly get Billy to leave after, but dad had other plans, and invited Billy to sit.

Admittedly, Billy seems to be taking this much better than I am. He's chosen the open spot next to me, his demeanor relaxed and casual. He's respectful enough to not touch me while in front of my father, but his arm is pressed firmly against mine, keeping me grounded. His perfect teeth flash when mom brings him a glass of water, and I swear I can see her swoon internally. He truly is easy on the eyes, mom can see that, and she's probably meticulously figuring out what

our nonexistent babies would look like. Hispanic mothers work that way, especially when they've been on the verge of considering their daughter a lesbian due to her lack of interest in men.

Dad eyes his wife, smirking knowingly and likely concurring with her that Billy is a good looking man, maybe he's also relieved to see me dating. Especially considering our conversation in the car a few weeks ago.

-----

I've met my fair share of dads in my life, but this one tops the rest. He doesn't have the stereotypical shotgun or bat at his feet, but is just sitting there. His fingers are intertwined casually over his abdomen and his leg is crossed over his knee. He seems like he's seen a few asshole guys in his life, and he's silently analyzing to see if I'm one.

I take my position that I've become familiar with. Don't get too comfortable in the seat, don't touch their daughter, keep the eye contact.

Finally, he speaks up, keeping the firm yet cordial presence.

"I feel like I've seen you somewhere, have we met before?"

Ah, the good ol 'you're not memorable enough for me' tactic.

"We have actually, well I don't think we spoke. But when Giselle's car had some issues, I was the mechanic that helped her."

He takes a deep breath in and I can't tell if it's unsavory or not. His head nods slowly as he digests what I've said. Suddenly, he looks over at his eldest daughter.

"He's the one you yelled at?"

His eyebrows are furrowed together over his dark eyes, the man is truly intimidating. Giselle squirms in her seat and lets out a squawking laugh, she's awkward- rightfully so, but my heart can't help but flutter at her noises. Her mother looks like she's witnessed a murder, and quickly interjects.

“Que?! Giselle, you yelled at this man?”

Giselle’s face gets several shades brighter, which I didn’t think was possible.

“Well yes, but it was different at the time mami.” She’s desperately trying to keep from getting scolded.

Her mother isn’t having any of it. She sucks on her teeth and shakes her head.

“He’s so handsome mija, why would you ever yell at someone like him?”

Now it’s my turn to feel the heat on my cheeks. I’ve gotten my share of compliments, but coming from Giselle’s mother gives it that extra kick. She surely is forward, doesn’t let anyone wonder what she’s thinking. I can’t help but wonder how Giselle ended up being so different in that aspect.

Giselle sinks further into the cushion and bites her lip, looking like she wants to dissolve.

“In her defense!” I interject and it comes out a little too loud. Everyone falls silent and turns to face me.

“I was being a little sarcastic with her.” It’s my turn to laugh awkwardly. The room suddenly feels like it’s a million degrees, I aimlessly scratch at the back of my head. A warm hand settles on my thigh and squeezes, a small comfort, but strong nonetheless. “She’s very passionate about her car, like I am with mine, so it’s understandable why she got upset.”

All of the eyes stay on me, but I look at Giselle’s to ease my racing heart. They’re softer than her parent’s, I can see that she’s thankful, and sorry for all that’s happening.

Her father clears his throat, and sits back in his chair. His gaze flicks to the hand on my thigh, and it suddenly becomes cold as she pulls it away. I want to grab it back on instinct, but I understand there’s a specific line of respect that needs to be maintained here.

“So Billy,” my name sounds like tar coming from his mouth. “Are you from Hawkins?”

Involuntarily, I snuffle and swallow the mound of bile in my throat. I’ve got to get my shit together, since when am I this nervous?

“No, I’m from California.”

This peaks his interest, as his bushy brows raise.

“That seems to suit you, why have you stayed here?”

He knows nothing about me, do I really give off that much of a ‘white Cali guy’ vibe? I didn’t think so, and I don’t really act like any of the other guys out West.

“Family matters really, I’d love to go back when possible.”

He hums in understanding, then lets out a loud sigh. His eyes move back to Giselle, there’s some sort of silent communication occurring, and I don’t really know what to do. She suddenly clears her throat and speaks up.

"He's been very respectful with me papi, don't worry."

There’s a hint of an accent that comes out when she speaks with her parents. My jeans suddenly get itchy and my palms get sweaty at such an inappropriate time at the thought of their daughter.

Either way, his daughter’s comment seems to satiate him. He nods and lets out a deep yawn, then glances at his wife, who nods at yet another unspoken conversation.

“Well sir, it was nice to meet you, but we should really be getting to bed.”

He stands and approaches me with an outstretched arm, which I take firmly. He squeezes generously, but not in a way that intends to show dominance. I nod back in affirmation and release.

Before he departs he leans down and plants a firm kiss on the top of both daughter’s heads, but pauses on Giselle’s for just a beat longer.

The message has been received. She means everything to him, and if I didn't have the right intentions, I should leave now and not come back.

Her mother opens her arms as I stand, requesting a hug. I hesitate and glance at Giselle, who merely nudges me with her elbow to accept the offer. The woman's plush arms wrap around my shoulders as I return the gesture around her back. She smells like cooking oil and rose perfume, and odd yet comforting scent. She mumbles something into my shoulder and reaches up to plant a firm kiss on the side of my face.

When she releases her grip she smiles sweetly and offers that I am welcome anytime. But then somehow comes to the conclusion that I must be famished, even after dinner, and hooks her arm around my elbow to drag me to the kitchen.

-----  
After Giselle was finally able to fend off her mother and her valiant attempts to send me home with absurd amounts of food, she led me outside.

As nerve wracking as the entire conversation with her father was, I'm somewhat glad to have met her family. It gives me a better idea of who she is, and what her dynamics are. Granted, I don't think I would have done it this soon, but it looks like her dad has values. I guess I wouldn't really know what that's like.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

I can't help but laugh at how worried she is about something so trivial.

"It seemed like you needed my help a little more for a minute there."

That earns me a small smile, and it takes every ounce of me to restrain from cupping her jaw. She's got the prettiest features, even in the lowlight of night.

She doesn't meet my eyes, which I've noticed she does fairly often. I don't want to leave her feeling like this. I bend down and turn so that

I can look up at her downward gaze. She's got her cheek in her teeth again and I actually get the courage to poke the indent in her face.

Her nose crinkles in response while she stifles a smile, I can't do the same and end up flashing my teeth like an idiot.

"Thanks for coming out with me tonight, we should do it again. Soon."

Normally it's the other way around, but sometimes it seems like Giselle needs a little pushing. I don't want to lose her over simple anxieties.

She nods quickly and finally shows me her teeth. Her smile shines so bright that it puts the sun to shame, and I savor every second I have of it.

"Thank you for taking me, I had fun."

I waggle my eyebrows at her mention of fun, and she blushes. It's become my internal game to see how often I can make those cheeks turn pink. So far I've tallied fifteen.

"There's a nice dive bar just outside of town that I like to visit sometimes. How about we go there next?"

While it doesn't seem like the scene that Giselle would be a part of, I'm sure it would be fun. Maybe it'll help get her out of her shell.

She seems hesitant at first but then nods her head in agreement.

"Sure, that sounds like fun."

## 11. Chapter 11

I wanted to wait until he left before going inside, maybe to have a few moments to myself in the cool air. Some time to think, but he refused. His noisy engine grumbled in the driveway patiently while I stood under the yellow glow of the porch light. Our eyes met on multiple occasions, and ultimately ended with Billy smirking and waving me into the door from his steering wheel.

*What a gentleman*

I roll my eyes in response and wave goodbye one last time.

As soon as the knob clicks closed behind me, I hear the roar of his camaro as it pulls away down the street. My heart feels heavy for a moment after his departure, but the cacophony of shit in front of me quickly washes over my despair.

Mom is standing directly before me, with her hands on her hips. I can't quite distinguish whether she's disappointed or not.

"Giselle, why didn't you tell me about your boyfriend?"

The title sends a shockwave through me, and I likely resemble a fish with my mouth opening and closing while trying to formulate a response.

"They're just FRIENDS mami!" Lydia interjects from the stairwell. She's sitting on the top step, her chin in her hands. I'm sure she feels some semblance of guilt for ratting me out.

Mom swivels around to face her.

"Friends don't look at each other like that!" She's jabbing her finger in Lydia's direction. "I know those looks when I see them!"

"He's not my boyfriend ma, we just spent some time together."

I try to keep my tone even, and my description vague. Lydia doesn't deserve to get yelled at, I wouldn't want her to lie on my behalf anyway.



She turns back to me, and her eyes are aflame, they aren't angry but something is sparking there.

"Did you kiss him?"

Her tone is even, maybe a tad lilted, but it doesn't sound like she's ready to scold me. Hell, I'm a grown woman, and if I'd like to make my way around the cul de sac with every man I encounter, I can. Yet facing my mother with this is still enough to make some light sweat bead on the back of my neck.

"I really should go to bed."

I attempt to brush my way past her, yet she grabs my wrist firmly.

"Be kind to him. Don't scare him, or make him feel small. It only tears men down until..." she hesitates and squeezes my wrist in thought, "Just be kind."

She lets go as quickly as she grabbed me, and hurriedly gathers her robe straps to tighten it against her. Her face is solemn, as she ducks away down the hall to her bedroom.

-----

It's been a few days since I've seen Billy, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't feeling something similar to withdrawals. Somehow, almost every time I blink I get a flash of his teeth, or his eyes. Our sisters have spent enough time with each other at school to satiate their need to visit after hours, which means there haven't been any 'surprise' run-ins with Billy. I can't seem to remember why I dreaded those in the first place.

Maybe I'm reaching, but I've noticed that my car may need a little TLC. The windows are smudged, the dash is dusty, and it could use some air freshener. Would I look desperate if I pulled up at his work to pick up some supplies? Would he know what I'm up to? I'm sure it's blatantly obvious. Now really is a poor time to be questioning those things, as I'm just feet away from the shop's parking lot.

My chest instinctually gets tight at the sight of his car parked around back. It's gleaming in the sun on what's likely one of our last nice

days before the harshness of winter appears.

I'm in a parking space, mulling over what I'll say when I approach the counter. He'll know what I'm up to, know that I've missed him. Should I give him that satisfaction when he hasn't attempted to reach out to me at all during this lapse? My hand is on the gear shift, and I've convinced myself that I'll leave and wait for him to make the move, when he rolls out from under a Volkswagen in the open garage.

He immediately recognizes my car, and leans up on an elbow, his face gleaming under all of the smudged car mess.

I'm caught, I can't run now. What was I coming here for again? My train of thought has turned to mush at the sight of that damn face.

He waves me over, and watches intently as I step out of the car. He hasn't gotten up, and my self consciousness is growing by the second at the thought of him having a view of me from his current angle.

"Well what brings your pretty face by today..." He cranes his neck to look at my junkbox, "Is the old thing acting up again?"

He rolls himself back under the car, but keeps his head in view while he works. He's meticulously turning something with a socket wrench. His focus is trained on a nut that looks to be pretty difficult to loosen. His teeth are pinching his bottom lip tightly, while his brows are brought together in concentration.

The sight of Billy doing something so simple makes my knees wobble slightly, while I fish for my original reason for visiting.

*Cleaning! Air freshener. All things I could have gotten at the general store...*

"I uh, no, the car is fine. I just needed a few things to clean it up. It's gotten kind of dirty here recently. Maybe an air freshener too"

Billy's hands stop suddenly, yet his eyes don't move for a moment. Gradually, a stupid grin comes over his face and his eyes flicker to mine. My heart jumps at the bright blue in the sunlight.

“Air freshener hmh? You know the pharmacy sells that, probably for a hell of a lot cheaper too.”

I shift back and forth between my feet, it takes everything in me to not wring my hands. He knows my motive, but I won't give in that easily.

“I figured that you all might have a better selection.” I say it like it's obvious, like the pharmacy doesn't have an entire aisle dedicated to car supplies.

He's turned his attention back to the underside of the vehicle, his tongue is sticking at the corner of his mouth, he's grunting lightly as he twists, and my awful mind couldn't be happier that the nut is refusing to budge.

“Well John is inside and should be able to help you with our *selection*” he advises between little grunts and pants, “When you're done come back out and chat... If I can get this son of a bitch off.” He lets out a loud hiss as his arm finally twists the pestering piece off. It falls to the ground with the tiniest metal clang. Billy glances back my way, his forehead is dusted with a bit of sweat, then he smiles again. “Got it.”

-----

I was terribly wrong about the notion of a larger collection of smelly trees in the auto shop, so I decided on a basic pine scent, and some wet wipes for the interior. Billy was also correct about it being absurdly priced here. I collected my paper bag of goods with an irritated grumble, while the golden retriever in a jumpsuit, *John* , happily waved me off.

When I round the corner to the garage again, Billy's standing by the car, flipping through a clipboard of paperwork, meticulously marking things off with his pen. His focused face is awfully adorable, he purses his lips slightly while his eyes scan the writing before him intently.

The scene only lasts for a second as he hears me approaching, and his gaze lifts from his forms. He glances between the paperbag and my

face a few times, then grimaces.

“What was the damage?”

I sigh and roll my eyes, “About twice the price of the pharmacy.”

He stifles a snicker as he looks back down at his board, “Could say I told ya so.” He hesitates for a moment, then begins writing. “You could’ve saved yourself some money and just been honest about wanting to see me”, He challenges with a casual glance through his lashes and a sly smirk.

Out of sheer embarrassment, I counter with being defensive. My arms are promptly crossed and my weight shifts to my left leg. Similar to when he pissed me off at this very establishment a few weeks ago.

“Who says I’d want to see you? You’re all gross and sweaty.”

A true lie, he’s never looked better. His rolled up sleeves reveal that he’s toned and tanned even in the cool weather. It’s understandable, being around running engines in a covered garage must get awfully warm. His uniform fits him well, and his sweat really doesn’t make him smell bad for some odd reason.

He pauses his writing again, fully looking up at me now, and cocks his head to the side. He’s studying me, his eyes gaze up and down, their pupils dilating with every passing second. They finally rest on my face, which is likely now red hot after feeling so exposed.

“Now Giselle,” he starts while bringing his arms up to cross, matching my form. He knows what he’s doing, and my eyes instinctually go to his biceps. “It would be an awful shame if you had that much of a problem with a bit of sweat.”

*Was that a sex joke? That had to have been a sex joke.*

I audibly force the pool of anxious saliva that’s accumulated down. It’s loud enough that I’m sure he can hear it.

*How do I respond? Can I even try and be sexy enough with a response that isn’t laughable? Or maybe he was being completely literal. But let’s be real, what man with that look in his eyes would be literal right now?*

Enough time has passed with my damned internal dialogue that things have gotten a bit awkward.

“I’m glad you got the point,” Billy’s cheeks are a little red, and he must’ve seen my obvious thinking face. He probably isn’t used to not getting flirtatious banter back, and for some reason it’s making me incredibly self conscious.

But if I try now, it’s painfully obvious.

I try my best to clear my throat, and make what must be the most unsexy noise in the world.

“No, sweat doesn’t bother me where it counts.” I lift my gaze back up to him, it feels like someone set the thermostat to a million degrees. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears.

His cheeks have gotten considerably darker at my less than subtle response, and he ends up ducking his head and snickering.

“Good to know.”

-----

It’s Friday night, and also apparently date night, as scheduled after a somewhat embarrassing but also electric encounter with Billy at work. He’s wanting to go to a bar that I’ve never heard of, and I don’t really know the attire. Unfortunately, since I don’t have any friends to confide in with my current woman troubles, I’ll have to figure it out for myself.

I ponder my dilemma as I scan the contents of my closet. Is this a casual bar? That seems more of Billy’s style, as I don’t see him as the clubbing type. As wild as it sounds, I’ve only known the attire for a dance club. That’s all I’ve ever seen the women in my family go to. Granted, this was while we were in Miami for a bit, but it still counts. They’d pull on the tightest outfit they could find, with sky high heels. Their hair would be teased to the heavens, or slicked down straight enough to cut someone. Latin culture is a little different, and sometimes we’re frowned upon for being too revealing. But that’s just how it is.

I do know that if I show up to a casual bar with a crazy outfit, it'll be more than frowned upon, and I'll likely be worried about adjusting myself the entire time. Tucked in the back of my closet, is a dress that my aunt brought when she came and visited us a while back. It's a tad short, but that's nothing some hosiery can't help with to keep me warm. While I don't have stilettos, and would likely break my neck if I owned them, I do have some four inch heels.

The dress is a mauve red, nothing too loud, but enough to catch an eye. It's more of a wrap style, which makes me feel better that I can adjust it, but it does plunge really low. I don't have the girls this exposed often, but it's not such a bad thing if it's in his presence, right?

Mom and dad turned in early tonight, so my escape must be done as silently as possible.

I gingerly close my door, making sure to turn the handle at the latch so it doesn't make any noise. I end up having to walk on my toes so that my heels don't click across the hardwood.

By the door, I scribble a note advising that I'll be out late, and to not worry.

-----

The drive to Duck's isn't too bad. About thirty minutes, and just on the outskirts of Hawkins. I would go there with some friends, namely Alex when we were younger, and really not allowed in there anyways. We'd pick fights, get trashed, and stumble to some unknown place before crashing. My hangovers were the worst, but the nights were fun.

Giselle doesn't seem like the bar type, but I thought it would be nice to introduce her to something that I enjoyed doing. She dressed a bit formal for the occasion. It's not a bad thing, not at all, but I'm sure I'll have to bat away lingering eyes all night.

I try to sneak a glance at her profile any chance I get. I don't think I've been caught yet, and if I have she hasn't made it known. The thought of her mouth hasn't left my mind, and it's killing me that we

haven't kissed or moved any further since the drive in. She's giving me the impression that she intends to take things slow. I can do slow. I can do slow for her, but it doesn't make it any less taxing.

The radio is playing something, too low for me to immediately recognise, but it's enough for us to not need to fill the space with talking. It's a bit of a relief. I constantly feel like I have to watch what I say, to avoid screwing up. It isn't her fault, she's not overly sensitive, it's just that I normally am the reason why things end. I get angry, embarrassed, bitter, and say something I don't entirely mean.

The sound of fabric shifting brings my eyes to her. She's crossed her legs, and the split in her dress is revealing her thigh. I'm not one to get all excited over a bit of skin, but in contrast to her dress color, it's intoxicating.

"I'm not gonna lie," Gisselle's voice breaks the air, "I'm not a big drinker."

I raise an eyebrow in concern and glance between her and the road.

"And you think I am?" I ask cautiously.

Her face drops, I feel somewhat bad, but maybe it's important to help clear the air on my previous bad boy image.

"I didn't mean it that way, I guess I was just concerned about your expectations when we got there." She's bristling a bit, building up an exterior. She really doesn't like being challenged.

"There's no expectation for you Giselle," I'm getting a bit irritated, not at her necessarily, but just with the notion that all I wanted to do was get trashed. I've worked pretty hard to steer away from that lifestyle. "I just wanted to go and have a good time."

I must've had an edge to my voice, because she's clamming up even further. Her arms tuck in and she pulls her jacket tighter over her chest.

As much as I want to feel bad, I get the creeping feeling that I'm nothing but this terrible guy to her. Maybe I deserve it for what happened, but dammit I'm trying. If she really thought that, then why

is she willing to spend time with me in the first place.

“I’m not some fucking loser that decides to drink their woes away, I’d like to think I’m different now. Maybe I don’t deserve a chance to prove that, and if that’s the case, why are we here?” I’m cracking, my shiny polished surface that’s easily accepted by people is wearing down. I’ll admit, my anger gets the best of me sometimes, but I’ve gotten better.

She doesn’t respond, in fact there’s no noise. I can’t even hear her breathe. When I glance over to check if she’s miraculously disappeared, my heart sinks. Her bottom lip juts out slightly just as she turns her head to the window.

What I said wasn’t fair, my reaction was uncalled for. She just wanted to let me know that this scene may not really be her thing, and that’s fine. I took it too far, it’s my fault.

“Giselle I-”

“Take me home,” she whispers just loud enough for me to hear, “please.” Her voice cracks slightly and I can feel my heart break with it.

I don’t argue with her, I don’t want the chance to argue with her. I’ve made my bed, and I should lay in it. What I said was uncalled for, this whole thing is fucked up.

My fingers drum anxiously on the steering wheel while I turn around. I can taste blood from where I’ve gnawed the inside of my cheek raw. How do I fix this? Should I fix this? If this is the reaction I get when I’m only mildly irritated, how bad would it be when I’m actually pissed off.

Next to me, Giselle sits straight, looking forward. The tip of her nose is red, but otherwise, there’d be no other indication that she was crying. She’s tied her jacket up and is completely removed from me in every way possible. I swear she’s even got her entire right side pressed up to the door. She’s composed, strong, and I’m the dick that hurt her.



It doesn't take long for us to get back to her house, forty minutes round trip. I managed to fuck up in twenty minutes time. She's jamming the seat belt latch as hard as she can as soon as her home comes into view, while her other hand grips the door handle.

If I'm going to have any chance of apologizing, of salvaging whatever crumbs of even friendship we can have, I have to do it now.

"Giselle, I'm sorry." I choke out as soon as we bump into her driveway.

She glances at me over her shoulder, her eyes wave over my frame once, then she's gone.

Her heels click quickly to the front door, and we don't play the 'who's leaving first game' this time. She doesn't look back at me at all, but closes the door quietly behind her.